The Cost of Holding On

A Request to the Reader

My name is Krish.
Before you begin this story, I ask you for one simple thing — patience.

Please read till the end.
Not quickly.
Not selectively.
And not with conclusions already formed.

What you're about to read is not a version written to win sympathy or to assign blame. It is only an attempt to be honest about what was felt, lived, and survived. My partner and I went through a lot — more than most people ever see from the outside — and even today, I don't fully know where the fault truly lies. Maybe it was mine. Maybe it was hers. Maybe it was timing, fear, or circumstances that neither of us knew how to handle.

I am not asking for judgment.
I am not asking to be defended.
And I am not asking you to take sides.

If you feel the urge to judge, I ask you to keep it with you — not for me, but as a lesson carried forward from this story. Let it be something you learn from, not something you pass back as a verdict.

All I ask is that you listen.
Completely.
Till the very end.

Thank you for giving this story your time.

Chapter 1: Before I Knew Her

Description: *A quiet beginning. A crowded house. A wedding that felt ordinary.*
Before feelings had names, before intentions were clear, there was only observation, hesitation, and a moment that didn't ask to be remembered.

I was sixteen years old then. Quiet by nature. Introverted. Shy.
Talking to girls was never easy for me, not because I didn't want to, but because I never knew what to say or how to say it. I stayed in my own space, observing more than speaking.

It was sometime in February 2022. Nothing special about the day, nothing that warned me about what was coming. I remember my grandma and my mumma sitting together, casually discussing who would attend a marriage function in Harraiya. I was there, listening without interest, unaware that this ordinary conversation would quietly pull me toward something that would change me.

Our house was never quiet, even on calm days. It held all of us together under one roof.
There was me, trying to understand myself at sixteen, and my younger brother, loud and restless in ways I never was. My mumma and papa carried responsibility differently. Papa stayed mostly silent, focused on work and outcomes. Mumma filled the spaces with words, care, and constant movement.

My grandma was the backbone of the house. Everything somehow revolved around her presence, her routines, her voice.
My elder uncle was rarely home. He worked in the merchant navy[Chief Officer], sailing away for months at a time. Because of that, my aunty lived in Noida for her office work. She would come home when my uncle returned or any special occasion like festivals, and during the rest of the year, her absence felt normal, like something we had quietly accepted.

My younger uncle lived with us and worked alongside my father in our jewellery showroom. Business conversations floated through the house often, mixed with phone calls, numbers, and plans for the future. I listened to them without fully understanding, already sensing that my path might be different.

And then there was Charlie.
Our St. Bernard. Too big, too gentle, and completely unaware of human complications. He moved through the house like he belonged to everyone and no one at the same time. When the house felt crowded, Charlie somehow made it feel lighter.

That was my world in early 2022. Structured. Familiar. Predictable.
I didn't feel lost. I didn't feel incomplete.
I didn't know I was standing at the edge of something new.

While mumma and grandma were talking, I casually jumped into the conversation. Without thinking much, I said I would attend the marriage function. I didn't mean it. It was one of those things you say just to fill silence, without any intention behind it.

They both looked at me for a second. No surprise. No questions.
Then they went back to their discussion as if nothing had happened.

At that time, my Class 11th final exams were already over. Days passed normally. I forgot about the conversation almost immediately.

Two days later, mumma and grandma came to me together.

“You have to attend the marriage and the party next day,” mumma said. “And you haven’t even decided what you’re going to wear. Packing is also not done.”

I looked at them, confused.
“I wasn’t serious about going,” I said. “I just said it casually.”

Grandma didn’t argue. She stated it, calmly, like a fact already written.

“I’ve already told everyone in Harraiya that I’m coming,” she said. “And that Krish will come with me.”

I stayed quiet.

She continued, her voice steady. “After corona and lockdown, this is the first time you yourself said you wanted to go somewhere. So I told them.”

That’s when it started sinking in.
I wasn’t just invited. I was already expected.

Crowds made me nervous. Functions drained me. New places, unfamiliar people, constant attention, all of it made me uncomfortable. I wasn’t built for loud rooms and endless conversations. Yet, without realizing it, I had agreed to step into one.

And there was no easy way out anymore.

I finished my packing without much excitement.
On **19 February 2022**, I left home with my grandma and reached Harraiya. By the time we arrived, the house was already alive with noise, colours, and people moving in every direction.

That day was the **Haldi Ceremony**.

Harraiya was not new to me. I had been coming here since childhood, mostly because of Aryan. By blood, he was my uncle, but he was younger than me, so we never treated each other that way. Somewhere along the years, he became my brother instead.

He had a sister, Anika. When we were younger, the three of us spent time together easily. But as we grew older, things changed. I spoke less with her, without any clear reason. Aryan and I mostly ended up roasting her, laughing among ourselves, like boys often do when they don’t know how to act otherwise.

Still, Aryan was the reason Harraiya felt familiar.
Whenever I came here, I stayed around him.

During the haldi ceremony, that didn’t change. I stayed with him the entire time, moving where he moved, standing where he stood. Surrounded by people, colours, laughter, and music, I clung to what felt known. It made the crowd easier to handle.

I didn’t know then that this comfort was temporary.
That staying in one familiar corner was about to end.

The next day, we all got ready early and went to the temple for the actual wedding. The rituals went smoothly. There was nothing unusual about it, nothing that stood out enough to stay in my memory. Just prayers, familiar faces, and the usual rush of a wedding morning.

After the ceremony, people slowly began to disperse. Aryan left with his family for Faizabad to receive his favourite cousin, Naveen. I didn't go with them. I returned to Harraiya with my grandma and the rest of the relatives.

By the time we reached back, exhaustion had settled in. I lay down and slept, unaware of how close I was to a moment that would stay with me far longer than the wedding itself.

The next day was the day that changed everything.

Around midnight, Aryan returned to Harraiya with his family. Naveen bhaiya was with them. I had never met him before. When we finally spoke, it didn't feel awkward for long. We introduced ourselves, talked for a while, and he told me he knew my father well. Somehow, that made me feel closer to him.

By the next day, the three of us stayed together almost the entire time. Conversations flowed easily. I felt a bond forming, the kind that doesn't need effort.

That evening was the party.

Aryan's mother, who was related to me by blood and felt like another grandma figure, was extremely busy. She ran her own beauty parlour, and on party nights like this, her schedule was packed. Aryan often helped her by taking photos for her parlour's Instagram page.

I stayed around him.

At some point, I noticed things that made me uncomfortable. Small things at first. Moments where I didn't know how to react. I felt out of place, unsure whether to speak, unsure whether to step away. I stayed silent, convincing myself that staying quiet was easier than confronting something I didn't fully understand.

I didn't support it.
I didn't stop it either.

And that silence said more about me than I was ready to admit.

We all got dressed up for the party soon after. The house slowly emptied as family members and relatives prepared to leave for the venue. Aryan was already busy, moving around with his phone, clicking photos, posing for his own pictures, helping others with theirs. He was good at it, confident and comfortable in front of the camera.

We left Harraiya together and reached **Hotel Krinoscco in Faizabad**. The place was bright, loud, and crowded. As soon as we entered, Aryan drifted away again, pulled by familiar faces and the excuse of clicking more photos.

That's when Naveen bhaiya leaned toward me.
"I've come to Harraiya after a long time," he said. "I don't know many people here. Stay with me."

I smiled and nodded.
“It’s the same for me,” I said. “You stay with me too.”

It felt natural, like an agreement made without thinking.

We walked toward the buffet together and picked up some snacks. I don’t know exactly when it happened, but somewhere between standing in line and sitting down, something shifted. Aryan wasn’t part of my attention anymore. Not intentionally. Just quietly.

Naveen bhaiya and I sat at a table and kept talking. About ourselves. About where we were in life. About Aryan too, the way he behaved around people, the way he acted around girls. Naveen bhaiya greeted his relatives whenever they passed by, people I didn’t recognize. I stayed seated, watching, listening, learning faces without names.

By relation, Naveen bhaiya wasn’t directly connected to me. He was Aryan’s cousin, and also related to someone I was yet to meet. Technically, he was an uncle in the family tree, older than me by age. But he never acted like one. With me, he felt more like an elder brother, someone easy to talk to, someone who didn’t expect me to perform or pretend.

Without realizing it, I stayed beside him the whole evening.

I don’t clearly remember when she sat beside him. There was no announcement, no moment that demanded attention. She was just there.

She wore a blue dress. I noticed that first. Then the braces on her teeth when she smiled slightly, the red lipstick, the way she sat without drawing focus to herself. I didn’t look at her face directly. Not properly. I wasn’t confident around girls, and I didn’t trust my eyes to stay where they were supposed to.

She had come with her mumma and papa.

Dinner passed like everything else that night. Plates were filled and cleared. People joined and left our table in intervals. Aryan drifted in and out, sometimes sitting with us, sometimes disappearing again. I stayed mostly quiet, listening more than speaking.

At some point, I heard a name.
“Shasi.”

I wasn’t sure if it was hers or if it belonged to someone else. The name stayed with me longer than it should have, repeating itself in my head without asking permission.

The entire party ended without a single conversation between us. I didn’t speak to her. I didn’t really look at her. Whatever existed between us at that point existed only in silence.

When her family started leaving, Naveen bhaiya and I walked with them toward the main gate. I don’t remember why I did that. It felt natural, like following the flow of the evening.

I still didn’t know who she was.

When her family started leaving, we reached the main gate of the hall. Just before stepping out, she suddenly took Naveen bhaiya's phone from his hand and turned the camera toward us to take a selfie. It happened so naturally that no one questioned it.

Naveen bhaiya looked at me and said, "Come, you too."

So I stepped into the frame.

A simple photo. Nothing dramatic. Just three people standing close for a moment.
I didn't know then that this picture would quietly become a turning point in my life.

As we walked down the stairs near the gate, I noticed they were uneven. People had already slipped there a few times that night. She missed a step and fell slightly forward.

A laugh escaped my mouth before I could stop it. It wasn't planned. It wasn't intentional. It just came out.

Naveen bhaiya laughed for a second too. Then, almost immediately, he held her arm and helped her stand properly again. The moment passed quickly, like it never mattered.

But something about it stayed with me.

When she left with her parents, I finally asked who she was.
Naveen bhaiya replied, "She is Shasi. My mother's brother's daughter."

The name stayed with me.

A little later, I asked Naveen bhaiya to click some photos of me. Mumma had told me to send her a few pictures from the function. He clicked several shots, different poses, casual ones too. I told him to send me all the photos in which I appeared.

He sent everything.

I sat down and went through them one by one. That's when I saw her properly for the first time. In the selfie she had taken, Naveen bhaiya stood in the middle, and I was at the corner of the frame. She was holding the phone.

I felt something then. Not excitement. Not love.
Just a quiet pull.

I didn't want a relationship. I didn't imagine anything big. I only wished that she had known me, even if it was just as a friend. That there had been a conversation between us. Nothing more.

I went to the washroom and searched her name in Naveen bhaiya's Instagram followers list. It didn't take long to find it.

I sent a follow request.

Then I waited.

Chapter 2: Somewhere Between Smiles and Screens

Description: *Two people talk, wait, smile, and slowly step into something they don't yet understand.*

The follow request sat there like a question I had asked too softly.

I checked my phone more than I should have. Not constantly. Just often enough to pretend it didn't matter. Each time, the screen stayed the same. No notification. No movement. Nothing to react to.

At midnight, everyone returned to Harraiya. The house filled up again, the way it always did after functions. Luggage in corners. Conversations overlapping. People laughing, yawning, settling back into routine as if nothing important had happened.

Night came quietly.

One by one, mattresses were spread out. Lights were switched off in parts of the house. The noise softened into murmurs, then silence broken only by distant sounds from the street.

I lay down with my phone beside me.

I told myself I wouldn't check again. That it was pointless. That whatever was going to happen had already happened.

Still, before sleeping, I picked it up one last time.

The request was gone.

Not pending. Not accepted.

Rejected.

There was no message. No explanation. No emotion attached to it except the one I supplied myself. The screen didn't change its expression. It just told me the truth and moved on.

I didn't feel embarrassed. I didn't feel angry. I didn't even feel hurt in a way that demanded attention.

I just locked my phone.

I turned to the side.

And I slept.

Morning came without announcing itself.

I don't know why I did it. It wasn't habit. It wasn't hope either. Still, the moment I woke up, before the house fully stirred, before thoughts could organize themselves, my hand went straight to my phone.

I unlocked it.

There it was.

Shasi's follow request.

From her side.

For a second, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I locked the screen and unlocked it again, as if repetition might expose a mistake. But it stayed. Her name. Her profile. Waiting.

The rejection from the night before suddenly felt unreal, like something that had happened in a different version of the same story.

I accepted the request.

Then, without overthinking, I sent one back.

This time, I didn't stare at the screen. I placed the phone down, face-up, pretending I wasn't watching it from the corner of my eye. Minutes passed slowly, stretching themselves thin.

When I picked it up again, the request was gone.

Accepted.

That was it.

Nothing more happened.

No message. No greeting. No awkward "hi." Just two profiles now connected, sitting quietly on each other's screens. We followed each other, but our conversations hadn't begun. A door had opened, but neither of us had stepped inside yet.

I didn't know what to say.

And maybe, neither did she.

For now, that felt enough.

After that, the silence returned.

Not the heavy kind. Just the kind that sits beside you while you pretend to be busy. I didn't know how to start a conversation. Typing "hi" felt too loud. Typing nothing felt safer.

While me and grandma began packing to leave for Padrauna, the house slipped into that in-between state. Bags half-zipped. Clothes folded and unfolded again. Instructions repeated. Familiar chaos preparing to move on.

My packing finished early.

I sat down with my phone, scrolling without really seeing anything. Her profile came up again. The selfie. The only photo where we existed together in the same frame.

That's when the idea came.

It wasn't brave. It wasn't clever. It was just… possible.

I opened Instagram and created a post. Three photos. Nothing special about the first two. Just function pictures, with Aryan and Naveen. The third slide was the selfie. The one she had taken. The one I had seen properly only later.

I tagged Shasi.

Not with a message. Not with an explanation. Just a small digital nudge, placed carefully, hoping it wouldn't feel intrusive.

I posted it.

And then I waited.

Not actively. Not refresh-after-refresh. Just with a quiet hope sitting somewhere in my chest, pretending it wasn't there.

I didn't know if she would notice.
I didn't know if she would react.
I didn't even know if this counted as starting something.

But for the first time, I had done *something*.

And that felt like enough for now.

I sat in the car with my grandma as we left Harraiya. The road stretched ahead, familiar turns slowly replacing wedding noise in my head. I wasn't thinking about my phone anymore. I had already done what I could.

Somewhere halfway home, my phone buzzed.

I saw the notification.

I didn't open it.

I didn't know what to say, and for once, doing nothing felt easier than saying the wrong thing.

A little later, another notification appeared. The first message had been unsent. In its place, there was an emoji.

Before I could react to that either, it disappeared too.

Then, finally, she reacted to the post with an emoji.

That was it.

No words. Just a small sign that she was there, and that she had thought about saying something, even if she decided not to, she was also not sure what to say or react.

That was enough to break the silence.

I opened the chat.

“Heyy bua, where are you from?” I typed.

It made sense to me. Naveen bhaiya was my uncle by relation, so technically, she was my bua.

Her reply came quickly.

“Heinn, bua kisko bola aapne?”
(*Wait… who are you calling ‘bua’*?)

I smiled at the screen and explained the family relation, the logic behind it, why I had said it.

She told me not to call her that.

Not harshly. Just clearly.

Then she told me she was from Faizabad.

The conversation settled into safe territory after that. She asked about me. I introduced myself. She told me she was in Class 10th and would be appearing for her board exams at the end of March and in April. I told her I had completed Class 11th and would soon be entering Class 12th.

That was all we talked about.

No dramatic exchange. No long messages. Just enough words to make the silence less intimidating.

And when the phone rested back in my hand, I felt something simple and real.

We had talked.

And for now, that felt like more than enough.

Somewhere between casual greetings and everyday conversations, she started mentioning her family.

Not in a dramatic way. Just naturally, the way people do when they begin to feel comfortable.

She told me she lived with her mother and father. She had two younger sisters and one youngest brother. Being the eldest, she carried a quiet responsibility at home, even if she never said it directly.

Her parents were strict. That much was clear from the way she spoke. Rules mattered. Expectations mattered. Freedom was measured carefully.

She also told me about her uncle and aunt, her father’s elder brother and his wife. They had three children of their own. Two elder daughters and one younger son. Family gatherings, cousins, and shared spaces were a normal part of her world.

I listened more than I spoke.

At this point, nothing felt heavy. These were just details. Names without stories. Facts without meaning attached yet. I didn't analyze them. I didn't connect dots. I just remembered.

It felt like learning the background of someone who was slowly becoming familiar, someone whose life was beginning to exist outside the screen for me.

And for now, that was enough.

Late-night conversations became a habit before either of us acknowledged it.

We waited for each other to come online. Sometimes without saying it. Sometimes by asking casually, pretending it didn't matter. Nights stretched longer than they should have, and sleep quietly adjusted itself around her presence.

On her Instagram page, she was different.

She was a content creator. Short videos. Lip-syncs to dialogues and songs. Confident in front of the camera, yet shy in conversation. From my point of view, she was beautiful. Not just in the way she looked, but in how she spoke. Polite. Soft. Careful with words.

My feelings grew stronger without asking permission.

We played around. Teased each other. I kept calling her "bua," just to annoy her. She protested every time, and I enjoyed it more because of that. Somewhere between jokes and laughter, comfort settled in.

For a few days, she started sending me romantic reels. Small things. Nothing explicit. But enough to feed what was already growing inside me.

One night, while talking late, she pushed me into saying it.

Not directly. Not forcefully. Just teasing, nudging, circling the truth until I had nowhere left to hide.

I confessed.

She teased me at first. Took her time. Made me wait in that fragile space between hope and embarrassment.

And then she accepted me.

We were in a relationship.

That night became one of the best nights of my life.

There was already a ring on my finger by then. A silver tortoise ring with a small blue stone on it. When I had returned from the party, I hadn't bought it exactly. I had asked my grandma, and she had given it to me from our own jewellery showroom. It sat quietly on my hand, unaware of the meaning I would later attach to it.

Mornings changed after that.

I would go up to the rooftop of my house and video call her. She couldn't speak. Family members were always around her. So we just looked at each other and smiled. No words. Just faces on a screen, holding a moment still.

In the evenings, sometimes, we managed voice calls. Getting her number hadn't been easy. When I asked for it the first time, she casually gave me a number.

I copied it. Saved it.

Only later did I realize it was fake [She gave: 9876543210, lol]

I laughed and asked again. She replied with a laughing emoji, asking if she should give her father's number instead. When I requested properly, she finally gave me her real number.

That feeling stayed with me.

Simple. Warm. Real.

We talked. We waited. Sometimes waiting was harder than talking.

And yet, everything felt right.

Chapter 3: The First Fracture

Description: *This chapter marks the moment where innocence begins to fade. A relationship breaks under pressure. A friendship grows, strains, and ends. What remains is not understanding, but experience.*

We were living a life that felt complete in its own quiet way. Talking every day. Caring without effort. Teasing each other, sharing reels, video calls, ending nights with sleepy goodnights. Nothing felt forced. Everything felt normal, and because of that, it felt safe.

The night before Holi Festival, we talked late again. Both of us were tired, our messages slowing down. We wished each other goodnight and went to sleep without thinking much about it.

In the morning, we wished each other Happy Holi. While we were talking, she suddenly asked me to wait. There was no explanation. Just that one word.

Minutes passed.

When she finally replied, the tone had changed. She told me she had been very sleepy the previous night and didn't remember whether she had locked her phone or not. During that time, her father's elder brother's son saw our chats. He asked her who I was and warned her that if her father came to know about this, he would not spare her. He told her to stop talking to me and to end everything immediately.

That was how the silence broke.

When I read her message, I froze.

For a moment, I genuinely thought she was joking. A few minutes ago, we were laughing, wishing each other Happy Holi, talking like nothing in the world could reach us. And suddenly, this. I asked her if she was serious.

She said yes.

She told me her cousin, **Pratyush**, her father's elder brother's son, had seen our chats. He asked her who I was and warned her that if her father ever found out, he would not spare her. He told her to stop talking to me immediately.

The happiness from just minutes ago felt unreal, like it belonged to another day.

I begged her not to leave me. I didn't argue. I didn't defend myself. I just asked her to stay. She told me she would talk to me later.

Later never came.

That evening, I tried messaging her. Her replies were slow. Short. Delayed in a way that felt intentional. Fear settled in quietly. I called her. She didn't pick up. Then a message came.

"Please don't call. I'm with my family members."

I asked her again, directly this time, not to break up with me.

She replied that we could stay friends.

I said yes.

Not because I wanted friendship.
But because I didn't want to lose her completely.

I remembered something she had once told me casually, almost playfully. That I should send her one photo of mine every day. It had felt sweet back then. Like a small promise.

So I took a photo and sent it to her with a message saying that I was keeping my promise.

Her reply came cold and clear.

"No more from now."

That line broke something inside me.

Days passed. Her replies started taking hours. Then days. Slowly, she unfollowed me and removed me from her followers. When I asked her about it, she said it happened by mistake. She accepted my follow request again, but she didn't follow me back.

That hurt more than I expected.

She made her account public and hid her stories from me. I found out accidentally. I had told a few of my friends about her when we were together. One day, a friend showed me her story and joked, "Look, our future sister-in-law is looking gorgeous."

When I checked from my own account, the story wasn't there.

I told Shasi about it. She didn't reply. She didn't even see the message. Later, silently, she unhid her stories from me.

Each of these things hurt in small ways. And together, they hurt a lot.

Her board exams were coming up, so in April, I stopped messaging her completely. I didn't want to be another problem in her already heavy life.

At the end of April, I checked on her once. I asked how she was doing.

She replied that no one treated her well. That her feelings had no value. That she felt like even animals were treated with more care.

I didn't know how to respond to that.

A few days later, she deactivated her Instagram account.

And just like that, she disappeared.

When my Class 12th began, my life was already carrying silence.

Before Shasi entered my life in February, there had been one other girl. Her name was **Asha**. If I had to label it, she wasn't just a friend. She was the closest thing to a female best friend I had ever had.

We had known each other since Class 7th. Back then, it was simple. School conversations, familiar faces, nothing complicated. In Class 9th, we talked a little more. Not constantly, but enough to know each other beyond just names on an attendance sheet.

In December 2019, something happened. Just school-life things. Nothing dramatic enough to define here. But after that incident, she stopped talking to me.

A few months later, my Class 9th final exams ended, and then the COVID-19 lockdown began. Schools shut down. Life paused. We didn't see each other again. With time and distance, that silence became normal.

In December 2021, unexpectedly, she reached out again. She had asked my number from one of my best friends. I wasn't attending school in Class 11th at that time. I was dealing with asthma, congestion, and constant nasal blockage. I stayed home most days.

She was worried.

That concern brought us back into conversation. We talked regularly from December 2021 till January 2022. It felt familiar, like picking up a conversation that had been left unfinished years ago.

But it didn't last.

After another incident, which I'll speak about later, her mother didn't like that we were talking. And just like that, the conversations stopped again.

We didn't fight.
We didn't argue.
We just… stopped.

Before Shasi, Asha was the only girl I had ever talked to deeply, consistently, and comfortably. And losing that connection had already taught me how easily things could end without closure.

I just didn't know then that I would have to learn the same lesson again, in a much heavier way.

Asha was never someone I imagined myself being in a relationship with. Not because of distance, but because of difference. She was a topper. Focused. Disciplined. I was an average student, still trying to understand myself, my emotions, and my place. Whatever existed between us had always been friendship, comfort, and familiarity. Nothing more.

After my breakup with Shasi, I didn't tell anyone about it. Not my friends. Not Asha. I carried it quietly, pretending nothing had changed.

When Asha and I started talking again after my breakup, I still told her about Shasi as my girlfriend. I even showed her a photo. She smiled, appreciated how open and forward our relationship seemed, and wished me a happy life. There was no bitterness in her words. At least, not then.

The next day at school, something shifted.

Before lunch break, everything felt normal. She teased me using Shasi's name, the way friends do, lightly, without malice. But after lunch, her mood changed. The jokes stopped. Her tone felt distant.

Later, she asked me a question that caught me off guard. She asked whether I had told Shasi about her.

I asked why that mattered.

She said she wanted to know if Shasi was okay with me having a female best friend. The way she said it made me realize something had already been misunderstood. There was a trace of jealousy there. Not loud. Not obvious. Just enough to be felt.

This is something I'll explain more clearly later.

Arguments followed. Not all at once, but slowly. On text. Sometimes in tuition. Small fights that didn't seem important individually, but together started creating distance.

At one point, she told me directly that she didn't like Shasi.

She said she had only seen her photo once, but from that alone, she felt Shasi looked like someone who liked to argue, someone who would turn conversations into word fights.

I didn't know how to respond to that.

I was already broken from one place. I didn't realize I was about to lose another in a completely different way.

I didn't tell anyone about the breakup. Not because I didn't trust people, but because I felt ashamed of it. I was scared that if others knew, they would tease me, troll me, spread my breakup news in my class, turn something painful into a joke. So I carried it alone, pretending nothing had changed.

Asha didn't know the truth either.

She knew Shasi. She knew that I used to talk late at night, that my phone used to stay alive long after the house went quiet. So whenever I tried to start a conversation with her, she would tease me.

"It's time for you to go," she would say. "Miss Shasi might be waiting."

I smiled when she said it. I nodded. I let the joke pass.

But no one was waiting.

Each time she said it, something inside me tightened. The words were harmless, but the truth behind them wasn't. I was still acting like I belonged somewhere I had already been removed from.

As the arguments between Asha and me increased, the weight became harder to carry. One day, I finally told her that I had stopped talking to Shasi.

I didn't explain how.
I didn't explain why.
I just said it was over.

After that, Asha relaxed. The teasing stopped. The tension softened. It felt like honesty had fixed something.

For a while.

Then, after some time, she told me something. Something connected to the incident I had been avoiding, the one I wasn't ready to talk about yet.

And that was when I realized that silence doesn't just protect you.
Sometimes, it changes how people see you.

Back in 2019, around Valentine's Day, everything in school revolved around crushes. Almost everyone had one. In class. In tuition. Names were exchanged like secrets that made people feel grown-up.

My friends kept forcing me to reveal mine.

The problem was simple. I didn't have one.

I avoided the question for days, but when everyone else started revealing their own crushes, I felt left out. Saying nothing made me feel boring, invisible. So just to stay relevant, just to feel included, I said a name.

I said **Asha**.

At that time, she was nothing more than an ordinary classmate to me. I didn't feel anything for her. No attraction. No attachment. It was just a name I picked so I wouldn't be the odd one out.

But once the name was spoken, it stopped being harmless.

From that day on, whenever Asha was nearby, my friends would pinch me, tease me, whisper things, laugh. What started as a joke slowly became a label I couldn't escape. I stayed quiet, hoping it would fade on its own.

In December 2019, it crossed a line.

One of my friends told Asha that I liked her. It happened during school dispersal. I saw her from a distance. She wiped her tears and went straight into the girls' washroom.

I didn't understand what I had done wrong.

We were good friends then. Or at least, I thought we were. I texted her later, trying to explain, trying to fix something I hadn't even created intentionally.

But the situation grew bigger than me.

Her mother found out and informed my tuition teacher. He called me, scolded me, and then informed my home. I was questioned, warned, and made to feel like I had committed something serious, something shameful.

That day changed me.

After that, I became afraid. Afraid to text. Afraid to call. Afraid to be misunderstood again. Afraid that any interaction with a girl could turn into another problem, another lecture, another accusation.

I wasn't scared of girls.

I was scared of consequences I didn't know how to control.

And that fear stayed with me. Quietly. Waiting.

Coming back to the present, Asha told me something I had never expected.

She said she had liked me too.

For a moment, I didn't know how to react. I was surprised. Happy. Confused. Somewhere between disbelief and relief. After everything that had happened in the past, hearing that felt unreal.

We didn't enter a relationship. Nothing was labeled. But after that conversation, the way we talked changed. We became closer. More open. More normal. Slowly, she became my best friend. And that was the reason she was jealous of Shasi. Not because she wanted me, but because she didn't want to lose the space she had with me.

One day, she dedicated me a Hindi song, **"Rehna Tere Paas" by Armaan Malik**. The words stayed with me, which meant "*I want to stay with you"*.

That dedication made me think. I started wondering whether she still liked me. Or maybe even loved me. She used to be egoistic about emotions, so I asked her directly.

She said she *used to* like me. She had feelings back then. But now, she said, it wasn't possible.

That answer didn't match her actions.

If it wasn't possible, then why dedicate a song like that?
Why give me a personal nickname like *"comfort zone"*?

At that time, I believed it was love. Now, when I look back, I understand that maybe love wasn't necessary for those things. A best friend can feel that deeply too. Songs and names don't always need romance behind them.

But back then, I needed clarity.

Every time I asked for it, it turned into an argument.

Whenever she didn't give me attention in school or tuition, frustration took over. And in those moments, I said something I knew would hurt her. I told her that I had started talking to Shasi again.

Every time I said that, her expression changed.

And like this, again and again, we fought. Over attention. Over expectations. Over things neither of us knew how to explain properly.

Finally, we decided to end the friendship.

There was no dramatic goodbye.
No final conversation worth remembering.

We just stopped talking.

And we haven’t spoken since. Not even now.

This is where I was left with silence again.

Chapter 4: I Didn't Know Better Yet

Description: *Conversations return, boundaries blur, and hope feels close enough to touch. This chapter captures a time before emotional maturity, where intentions are honest, understanding is incomplete, and lessons arrive only after damage has already been done.*

I was at my nani's house during the summer break after Class 12th, in June 2022.

Nani's house was never quiet. Someone was always calling someone else. Conversations travelled from one room to another without stopping. Names were repeated casually, without meaning to disturb anyone.

And one name kept coming up.

Shasi.

This Shasi was my mama's second daughter. Not the same girl who had once lived inside my phone. Not the one whose silence had followed me into Class 12th. Just a coincidence of names, nothing more.

Still, hearing it again did something to me.

Every time someone called her from the kitchen or asked her to bring something from another room, my mind reacted before I could correct it. For a split second, the wrong face appeared. The wrong memories followed. And then I reminded myself.

They were different people.

Different lives.

Different stories.

It had been months. April was the last time when I spoke to that Shasi, and even then, barely. One or two conversations. Nothing complete. Nothing worth holding on to.

I wasn't in love.

I was just wondering.

Her boards would be over by now. She must be relaxed. Sleeping longer. Laughing more freely. Living a version of life where exams were no longer watching her.

When I returned to Padrauna, that wondering didn't leave with the journey. It followed me home.

I opened Instagram. The chat was still there. I hadn't deleted it. I scrolled. And scrolled. Messages from a different version of me, sent by fingers that hadn't learned restraint yet.

I needed her number.

I had changed my phone. Everything else had transferred. Her number hadn't.

My thumb slowed down. Then stopped. Then continued again. It felt stupid to try this hard for something I didn't even know I would use.

But when I finally found it, I didn't feel excitement.

I felt weight.

Now I had a choice again.

And I didn't know what to do with it.

I stared at the number for a long time before sending anything.

When I finally typed, it wasn't brave. It wasn't confident. It was already half-defeated.

"See, I know you don't care about me. I just wanted to know if you're alright or not."

I sent it and put my phone down immediately, as if looking at the screen might make the waiting worse.

A few minutes later, her reply came.

She said she was good. She said it wasn't like that. She didn't explain what *that* was. She didn't need to.

Her replies came with gaps in between. Minutes that stretched longer than they should have. Long enough for me to notice. Short enough to keep me hopeful.

She told me she had made a new Instagram account and I asked her username.

I sent her a follow request.

She didn't accept it.

I waited. Then, awkwardly, I told her to accept it. She did. But she didn't follow me back.

I told myself it was fine.

I told myself not everything needed to be equal anymore.

On her new account, I saw her new reels. One after another. Confident. Relaxed. Free in a way she hadn't been before.

In few of them, she was wearing her mother's green saree.

She looked… different.

Not distant. Just untouchable.

The conversations started again. Slowly. Casually. As if nothing had ever broken.

But something was off.

I replied faster than she did. I waited more than she ever seemed to. When she disappeared, I noticed. When I disappeared, she didn't ask.

I wasn't her priority.

And the worst part was that she never said it.

She didn't have to.

I could feel it in the spaces between her replies.

At some point, the weight became too heavy to carry quietly.

I needed to know what I was to her. Or at least, what I wasn't.

So I confessed.

Not dramatically. Not with expectation. Just honestly. I told her how I felt, not because I wanted something from her, but because I was tired of guessing.

She replied calmly. Thoughtfully.

She said we should first focus on our careers. Get settled. Then think about love and marriage.

It sounded mature. Responsible. Like something adults say when they know better.

At that time, I believed her.

I didn't realize that sometimes, maturity is not guidance. Sometimes, it's a soft way of stepping back without announcing the distance.

Still, we talked.

Sometimes, when her mood was good, I would say it.

"I love you."

She would reply, "I love you too… ittu sa."

Which meant: I love you a little bit.

That was enough for me. More than enough.

On days when she didn't add *ittu sa*, my happiness felt louder than it should have. I held onto those moments carefully, as if fewer words meant deeper meaning.

Around this time, she changed her school for Class 11th.

She mentioned two names casually.

Utsav.

Diyansh.

Just friends, she said. Just people from the new school.

I didn't question it. I didn't have the courage to.

I was already learning how to accept less and call it understanding.

And I didn't know yet that this was the point where things truly began to slip away.

Once, she told me she wasn't compatible with girls.

I didn't question it then. I just stored it somewhere in my head, the way we store harmless facts.

But slowly, new names started appearing. New female friends. New conversations.

I didn't bring it up. I didn't want to sound insecure.

She talked to me about Utsav and Diyansh openly. How they shared lunch. How the whole class felt jealous watching them together. How their friendship was growing stronger every day.

I listened. I smiled. I told myself that trust meant listening without reacting.

But time was changing shape.

She had less of it for me. Or maybe, she was just spending it elsewhere.

Sometimes she told me she was going to sleep. Sometimes she said she had work.

And then I would see her online on WhatsApp.

I didn't ask. I didn't confront. I just noticed.

One day, while we were talking, she sent me a screenshot. A group chat. Three people teasing each other, trolling, laughing.

The names were hidden. The profile pictures were covered using the markup tool.

I stared at the image longer than I should have.

I asked her who they were.

She hesitated. Then she said their names.

Utsav.

Diyansh.

I didn't know why she shared that screenshot with me. Maybe she wanted me to feel included. Maybe she didn't realize what it would do.

But it broke something quietly inside me.

Utsav shared a story on Instagram and tagged her. She reshared it.

In those reshares, she pretended single.

Completely.

I told myself stories to survive that moment. That maybe she was just showing friendship. That maybe she was keeping her love life private. That maybe, one day, she would reveal me as a surprise to the world.

On 15th August, Independence Day, they appeared together again. All three of them. Same frame. Same story. Same reshare.

I stayed quiet.

I stayed understanding.

I stayed hopeful.

And somewhere in that silence, I realized something I wasn't ready to accept yet.

I wasn't being hidden for privacy.

I was being hidden because I wasn't certain.

And all I had left was hope.

Thin. Fragile.

And doing all the work alone.

Even then, she didn't disappear completely.

Sometimes, she talked to me like nothing had changed. She shared her ambitions, the things she hadn't said out loud to everyone.

She wanted to become an air hostess.

Her parents didn't approve. They believed it was a low-grade job for a girl. They thought the industry wasn't safe, that it carried a darkness they didn't want their daughter near.

At that time, I didn't fully understand all of it. The industry. The fear behind their thinking.

But I understood her.

I supported her quietly, the only way I knew how.

Her parents were very strict and according to her no one at home treats her well.

She was talented. I already knew that. She sang beautifully. She could draw. Paint. Create. Art wasn't just a hobby for her, it was a part of how she existed.

Aryan once told me that when he visited her house, the walls were filled with her paintings. Her work everywhere.

I smiled when he said that.

It felt like knowing her in a way most people didn't.

Around this time, I told Naveen bhaiya about us. I told him we were in a relationship. He didn't react negatively. He didn't question it.

Aryan and Anika found out too.

That made it feel real to me.

Like this wasn't just something living inside my phone anymore.

One day, while we were talking, something shifted. I don't remember how it began, or who took the first step, but she asked me not to tell anyone about what was going on between us.

Not Naveen bhaiya. Not anyone else.

I agreed.

Around the same time, I told my mother about her. I didn't say we were in a relationship. I told her she was someone I had met at that party night. A friend.

I told Shasi that my mother knew about her.

She said it was fine.

And in that moment, without realizing it, I accepted something dangerous.

She was allowed to exist in my world.

But I was not allowed to exist in hers.

Late August, it was my birthday.

Messages started coming in. Calls. Stories. Wishes from people who remembered because reminders told them to. The day felt loud in the usual way birthdays do.

Her message didn't come.

I had made my account public a few days earlier so she could see my stories without following me. I reshared the stories my friends posted for me, one by one.

Somewhere between those reshares, I opened her chat.

I typed “Hi”.

Her replies were dry. Polite. Short.

We talked for a while. Not about the birthday. Not about anything happy.

She told me she wanted to die because of how her parents treated her.

I didn’t know how to hold that weight. I was already tired. So I mirrored it without thinking. I told her I felt the same.

She stopped me.

She said not now. First, she would celebrate my birthday. She would wish me properly.

There was a pause after that.

I think she remembered something.

She went quiet. Then I saw her view my story.

A few moments later, her message came.

She wished me happy birthday. Apologized again and again for being late.

I didn’t care about the timing anymore.

I was just happy that she remembered.

That night, she sent me a lip-sync reel. One she hadn’t posted anywhere yet. Just for me.

I asked if it was my birthday gift.

She said yes.

I smiled at my screen longer than I should have.

From that day on, things felt lighter. She talked more warmly. More openly. The dryness disappeared.

We were happy again.

And that happiness stayed with us till her birthday, exactly two weeks after mine.

On 11th September, it was her birthday.

I wished her and sent a video edit of her photos with a song.

She replied, half-joking, half-serious, “Won’t you call me to wish? I want to hear your voice.”

It was the first time she had asked that since our breakup in March.

I called.

I heard her voice again.

I wished her properly.

I don't remember what exact words I used. I just remember how light my chest felt that day. I was happy in a way that didn't ask questions.

But happiness with her never stayed long.

After her birthday, the patterns returned. Replies slowed. Conversations thinned. The same distance wearing a different face.

Sometimes, she removed me from her Instagram. When I asked, she said her mumma had taken her phone to check, so for safety, she had removed me.

I sent the request again.

I waited again.

Somewhere in late September, I asked her for a video call. I wanted to see her. Not in a photo. Not frozen in a frame. Just… live.

She said not now.

She sent a picture instead.

I accepted it, but it wasn't what I had asked for.

We decided a day and a time for the call.

When the moment came, she was offline.

I sat there, watching the screen, waiting for the green dot that never appeared.

A few hours later, she replied. She said she had been sleeping.

Around the same time, I saw her WhatsApp status.

She was with Utsav.

His hand was on her shoulder. She was taking a selfie.

Something inside me collapsed quietly. My heart cried in a way that didn't make noise.

Still, I didn't say anything.

I was afraid that even one wrong word would make me lose her completely.

In early October, I was about to leave for my school trip to Nainital. Phones weren't allowed. Before I left, Naveen bhaiya spoke to me. He said he adored Shasi, but he didn't like that she hadn't told him about our relationship yet.

I told him to wait. Let her exams finish. Let me return from the trip.

When I came back, the day arrived.

I texted Shasi and told her that Naveen bhaiya knew about us, and he just wanted to hear it from her.

She didn't respond softly.

She said, "Tell him I was doing pranks. We are just friends and nothing more. There is nothing between us. I don't care about anyone. Just friends. Nothing more."

It came like a monologue. Fast. Defensive. Final.

I asked her to calm down.

She said she would text me at night.

I waited.

Instead, I was blocked.

WhatsApp.

Instagram.

Snapchat.

Everywhere.

There was no goodbye. No explanation. No last message to hold onto.

Just silence.

And this time, I knew it wasn't temporary.

This time, she hadn't drifted away.

She had chosen to disappear.

Chapter 5: A Temporary Answer

Description: *After loss, I didn't look for healing. I looked for somewhere else to stand. This chapter follows a time when attention felt like comfort, waiting felt like effort, and a second beginning carried the weight of what hadn't properly ended.*

Shasi was gone.
This time, completely, that's what I thought.

I wasn't confused anymore. I was hurt. The kind of hurt that doesn't ask questions, it just sits there and makes everything heavier. Naveen bhaiya knew everything. He knew how it ended, how suddenly I was cut off. But he didn't speak to Shasi about it. Maybe he didn't want to interfere. Maybe he thought silence was safer. I didn't ask.

In school, a few of my friends knew what had happened. Some told me to stay single and move on. Others said the usual things, that I'd find someone better, that this wasn't the end of the world. I listened to all of it, nodded at the right places, but none of it actually reached me.

It was a few classes before our Diwali holidays. School felt restless, like it always does before a break. During a short interval, I was standing on the ground floor when I saw her.

She was tall. Very fair. Wearing specs. Beautiful in a way that immediately pulled my attention. My heart reacted before my mind did. It beat the same way it had when I first noticed Shasi properly that night at the party.

I had seen many girls in my everyday life. Some of them were objectively more beautiful. But my heart had never reacted like this. This time, it did. And that scared me a little.

I waited to see where she would go.

She walked into Class 9th, Section C.

That detail stayed with me longer than it should have. 9th C was the same section I had once been in. It felt like a coincidence, but at that moment, I didn't question why my mind was collecting such useless signs.

I rushed back to my class and told a few of my friends. I described her the only way I knew how. A girl from 9th C. Tall. Fair. Wearing specs.

And just like that, without deciding anything clearly, something had already begun.

My friends looked at each other and smiled.

"Are you talking about *Anna*?" one of them asked.

They didn't wait for my answer. They started teasing immediately. She was the Blue House vice-captain. A council member. A topper. Taller than me. Everything that sounded impressive when said out loud in a school corridor. They laughed, half-joking, half-warning me about what I was getting into.

“Anna,” I repeated quietly.
The name stayed with me longer than the jokes did.

I told them I’d try to talk to her, as if saying it casually would make it easier.

My Class 12th classroom was on the first floor. When the second short interval began, I walked out with the intention of going down to the ground floor. But the moment I stepped outside my class, I saw her coming toward the corridor.

She wasn’t coming for me. She had her own reason to be there. Some council work, maybe. Something that had nothing to do with me.

Still, I stopped her.

I asked her name.

She smiled and said, “Anna.”

I asked her full name.
“Anna Shukla,” she replied.

I nodded and said okay, as if that was all I needed. I turned to leave.

Before I could take more than a step, she stopped me and asked, “Why did you ask?”

I smiled, the kind of smile that pretends confidence, and said, “You’ll get to know.”

Then I walked away.

I don’t remember exactly when it happened.
Whether it was before the Diwali holidays or after.
That part of the timeline is blurred in my head.

What I remember clearly is the feeling.
The urgency.
The need to act before the moment slipped away.

Nothing dramatic happened after that. No spark. No conversation. Just a moment that ended as quickly as it began.

During the Diwali holidays, I used whatever connections I had. The head boy was in Class 11th and attended my tuition. I knew he might have her number. When I asked him, he hesitated. He said he wasn’t sure whether it was Anna’s number or her mother’s.

I told him to give it to me anyway.

He didn’t send it. He just showed me the ten digits on his phone for a few seconds. I don’t know what took over me in that moment. Something sharp. Something reckless. I memorized the number instantly.

As soon as he left, I typed it into my phone, saved it, and sent a message.

She replied.

I told her it was me, Krish, who asked your name in front of staffroom.

She asked jokingly who had given me her number.
“Manav gave it to you, right?” she guessed.

Manav was the cousin of one of my close friends, Abhi. I told her no.

And that was it.

That was the entire conversation.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

During the Diwali holidays, the distance from school didn’t quiet my thoughts. If anything, it gave them more room to move.

I asked my friend Akshay if he could arrange a photo of her. He sent two.

I didn’t keep them just to myself. I showed them to my elder aunty. She had always been my secret keeper. She already knew about Shasi. She knew how suddenly everything had ended. I trusted her with these things because she listened without panicking.

She looked at Anna’s photos and smiled. She teased me lightly, the harmless kind of teasing that doesn’t accuse, only observes. I laughed along, pretending it was nothing serious.

But inside, something had already shifted.

That Diwali felt lighter than it should have. Not because anything had changed in real life, but because now I had her photos. I could see her outside the uniform. Outside the corridors. In clothes that made her feel more real, more reachable.

I caught myself opening those photos without any reason. Not studying them. Just… looking.

The holidays passed slowly after that. I wasn’t thinking about crackers or sweets anymore. I was waiting.

Waiting for school to reopen.
Waiting for movement.
Waiting for progress.

I didn’t want rest.
I wanted continuation.

When school reopened, nothing officially began.

I would come down the stairs with one or two friends. I didn’t follow her. I didn’t stop her. I just made sure I was there. On the ground floor. Close enough to see her.

Sometimes, she noticed.

I think she must have told her friends about me by then. About the boy who had stopped her once. About the name question. About the message during the holidays. I can't be sure, but the way her friends behaved made it feel obvious.

From a distance, when our eyes met, she smiled. Not openly. Not confidently. A small, shy smile. I smiled back, pretending it didn't matter as much as it did.

Her friends noticed.

They would tease her, nudge her, point in my direction. I could see them whispering, laughing, telling her to look. Telling her that I was there.

She would glance again. Sometimes smile again. Sometimes look away.

And that was all.

No talking.
No messages.
No steps forward.

Just repeated moments, stretched thin, happening every day without naming themselves as anything.

I finally asked Akshay to help me. I wanted to talk to her, but I didn't know how to make it happen on my own.

Akshay knew Anna. Not personally, not properly. But there was a connection. She came from a doctor's family. Akshay did too. She recognized him by face, even if she didn't know his name.

I wasn't even sure whether Anna knew my name yet. I didn't know if Manav had told her. I didn't know how much of me existed in her awareness. All I knew was that she recognized my face.

Akshay told me to come with him.

We went to her class. Akshay called her out casually, like it was nothing unusual. He told her he needed his biology book. I added, almost immediately, that I needed a maths book.

Before handing the book over completely, she paused.

She checked Akshay's ID card first. Then she looked at mine.

Just for a moment. Long enough to read it.

That's when I became sure of something I hadn't been sure about till then.
Now she knew my name.

Krish Gupta.

Not from someone else. Not through guessing.
Directly.

She handed me the book after that, smiled, and said I could keep it as long as I wanted.

I nodded. I didn't say anything more.

But something had settled quietly inside me.

At least now, I wasn't just a face anymore.

After a few days, I decided it was time to return the book.

By then, I wasn't the same boy I used to be. I wasn't fully confident, but I wasn't completely closed off either. I had started joking more, doing small pranks, pretending comfort even when I wasn't fully sure of it.

The evening before returning the book, I texted her.

I told her that by mistake, her book had gotten wet because water had fallen on it badly.

She replied casually, "It's fine, no problem."

That response relaxed me more than it should have.

The next day, during recess, I saw her washing her hands. I walked up to her and called her by name.

"Anna."

She looked up and replied,
"Yes, bhaiya?"

For a second, I thought I had heard it wrong.

"What did you say?" I asked, almost reflexively.

She repeated it.
"Yes… bhaiya."

The word hit harder than I expected.

Bhaiya.

Which meant Big brother.

Embarrassment rushed through me instantly. I didn't know what to say next. I didn't try to correct her. I didn't laugh it off. I just handed her the book and walked away, my head slightly lowered, my confidence evaporating in a moment.

When I went back, my friends asked what had happened. I told them.

And from that day on, "bhaiya" became a joke that followed me everywhere. Every conversation. Every laugh. Every tease. The word was repeated until it stopped being funny and started feeling like a reminder.

Later in interval, I went back to her.

I told her, quietly and directly, not to call me *bhaiya* again.

She looked at me for a second, then smiled and said, “Fine.”

That was it. No awkwardness. No explanation. Just acceptance.
That alone gave me more confidence than it should have.

After that, Akshay and I started planning.

We decided that I would propose to Anna on **14th November 2022**, Children’s Day. There was supposed to be a program in school that day. More movement. More excuses. A moment that wouldn’t feel forced.

But one or two days before, the school cancelled the program and declared a holiday.

The plan shifted.

We fixed **15th November** instead.

Akshay convinced one of Anna’s friends to help. The idea was simple. She would bring Anna to the hand-wash area during the short break. Lunch break would be too crowded. Too many eyes. Too many interruptions.

Everything was set.

On the evening of 14th November, I sat with the plan running in my head again and again. What I would say. How I would stand. Where I would look. How I would hand it to her.

I bought two same Dairy Milk chocolate bars. I don’t remember which one.

I bought two because in school, nothing ever stays private. If someone noticed, the chocolate would be taken, broken, shared. One would disappear before I even got the chance to speak.

The second one was backup.

Not for romance.

For survival.

That night, before sleeping, my mind refused to let me doubt myself.

I kept replaying small things. The kind of things that feel insignificant later, but at that time feel like proof. When she went to visit the head boy, whose class was beside mine, she would peep into my classroom. When she passed through the corridor near my class, she would look in through the window the entire way. My friends noticed it first. Then they showed me.

Each detail fed my confidence. I told myself I wasn’t imagining it. I told myself this wasn’t one-sided.

Finally, the day came.

Everything went according to plan.

I took the chocolate with me. Her friend brought her near the hand-wash area during the short break. Akshay stayed at a distance, casually blocking anyone who tried to come near the taps, pretending to be busy.

There she was. With her friend. And me.

All three of us standing there, with just enough privacy.

I told her “I love you” and offered the chocolate.

She smiled. She looked shy.

I asked her to take the chocolate quickly, before anyone noticed. Then I said it again. I told her I love you.

She smiled again.

I asked her to say something. Anything.

She said she needed to think. She said it with a light, almost playful smile.

I asked how much time she needed.

She told me her Terminal 2 exams were about to start in few days. She said she would answer after they were over.

I said okay. I told her I would wait for her reply.

She smiled.

And then we went back to our classes.

She had about two weeks left for her exams, with a short gap in between of a day, then my own Terminal 2 exams were going on too. Life didn’t pause for what was unresolved between us. We still saw each other during lunch breaks, passing glances without stopping.

Somehow, I don’t know how, it spread in her class that I had proposed to her.

Whenever I passed by, her classmates would tease her. They would point at me, laugh, hoot. Her friends joined in too, half-joking, half-curious. What had been private became visible overnight.

Around the same time, I started talking to her best friend, Manav(Abhi’s cousin). Slowly, cautiously. He told me things I held onto too tightly.

He said Anna wasn’t sure about me. That she wanted to say yes, but she was afraid of her parents. And that she couldn’t even say no, because she had told him that the way I had proposed, she didn’t have the heart to reject me.

Hearing that changed how I saw everything.

It felt like reassurance. Like proof. Like I wasn't waiting alone.

A few days before the day I was supposed to get her answer, I did something I still don't fully understand.

That morning, I told her I had two conditions.

If her answer was **yes**, we would be in a relationship.
If her answer was **no**, then we wouldn't stay friends. We would become strangers.

The moment I said it, I saw the surprise on her face. She looked at me, smiled faintly, and said okay.

I don't know why I framed it that way. Maybe I was afraid of being denied. Maybe I wanted to remove the option of an easy no. Maybe I thought drawing a hard line would force clarity.

Her exam days were going on.

Every morning before her exams, I wished her all the best.

And then, I waited for that day.

Chapter 6: When Everything Felt Fine

Description: *Love settles into routine, intimacy deepens, and fear learns how to hide. What feels like peace is only distance explained away. This chapter captures the moment before balance breaks, when reassurance is enough to stop questions, and hope works harder than truth.*

It was early December.

One day before the day I had been waiting for, my friends were unusually excited. They spoke with certainty, the kind that doesn't leave room for doubt. According to them, tomorrow was obvious. Tomorrow was decided. Tomorrow, she would say yes.

Their confidence spilled into me. Slowly. Unavoidably.
They joked. They smiled. They told me to stop overthinking. They made the outcome feel inevitable.
For the first time in days, I believed them.

The next day came.

Her exams were finally over. There were no excuses left for postponement, no reason to delay clarity anymore. I texted her first.

"Hii."

Her reply came shortly after.

"Hello."

We talked casually for a while. Nothing heavy. Just enough to pretend normalcy. Then I said it. Carefully, but directly.

"So today is the day. What's your answer?"

There was a pause.

She replied, "Should I tell tomorrow?"

I asked why. Asked if she still hadn't decided. Told her I also needed to study. That I couldn't keep my mind suspended like this anymore.

Then her message came.

"My answer is NO."

I replied, "Okay. No problem."

That sentence didn't carry what it should have. It looked calm. It wasn't. Inside, something collapsed quietly. I was shattered, for reasons I already knew too well.

I asked her one last thing.

“Do you remember my condition?”

She replied, “The stranger one condition?”

I said yes.

She started typing.

Before she could finish, I sent one word.

“Alvida.”

Which means goodbye.

Then I blocked her.

I closed my eyes and lay down on my bed.
No crying.
No phone.
No thoughts I could organize.

Just stillness.

At the same time, Akshay texted me.

“What happened?”
“What did she reply?”

I told him everything. That she had said no. That I had blocked her. That it was done.

He didn’t react the way my mind expected him to.

He said this wasn’t the right way. That I should respect her decision. That blocking her immediately wasn’t fair. He said we could still be friends. Or at least, if she ever needed me, she should be able to reach out.

I listened.

Not because I fully agreed.
But because I was already too tired to argue.

So I unblocked her.

I texted her again. I told her what Akshay had said. That I respected her decision. That if she ever needed me, I would be there.

Her reply came short.

“Hmm.”

Nothing else.

That was it.

That single word felt heavier than the no. It didn't reject me. It didn't accept anything either. It just closed the space quietly.

The next day, I didn't go for my first exam.

Maths.

I already had breathing issues back then. Asthma, congestion, the familiar tightness in my chest that made every breath feel incomplete. That morning, fear layered itself over it. I couldn't breathe properly. My chest felt locked. My thoughts ran faster than my lungs could keep up.

I wasn't prepared for the exam anyway.
Not academically.
Not mentally.

And more than that, I didn't know how I would face my friends. The same friends who had been so sure. Who had fueled my confidence. Who would be waiting for answers I didn't have the strength to explain.

The fear turned physical.

My breathing shortened. My body reacted before my mind could stabilize. I felt nervous, restless, trapped inside myself. And at some point, without making a conscious decision, I stayed back.

I missed my first exam.

Not because I didn't care.
But because I couldn't hold myself together long enough to walk into that room.

After Maths, the next exam was Hindi.

I tried to pull myself together. Hindi was different. It was the easiest subject for everyone, the one I could score in even without perfect preparation. I forced myself to study. Slowly, unevenly, but with intention. By the time I left for school, I felt almost ready.

I reached early.

I sat in my classroom, revising, my book open, eyes moving but mind still heavy. I was trying to act normal. Trying to be a student again, not someone who had lost control of his own breathing just a day before.

That's when Akshay came to the classroom door.

He called my name.

I got up and walked toward him, still holding my book. And then I saw her.

Anna was standing there.

Waiting.

For me.

She wanted to talk.

The moment stretched, just for a second. Enough for my heart to notice. Enough for fear to take over. I panicked. Not because I didn't want to talk, but because I didn't know how to hold another emotion right then.

I turned back immediately.

I told Akshay, almost defensively, that I had to study. That it was my exam. That I couldn't talk now.

And I went back to my seat.

I didn't look back at the door.

I kept revising, forcing my eyes to stay on the page, pretending nothing had happened.

A little later, we were asked to move upstairs to the exam hall.

The staircase was noisy. Students talking, laughing, revising loudly, footsteps overlapping, invigilators shouting instructions. I was walking while revising in my head, lines repeating, words mixing into each other.

Behind me, somewhere in that noise, Anna called out.

"Krish bhaiya."

Once.

Then again.

"Krish bhaiya."

The third time, she dropped the word that separated us.

"Krish."

I didn't hear her.

Or maybe I did, but not clearly enough to turn back. My mind was locked on survival. On the exam. On keeping myself from falling apart again. I kept walking upstairs, eyes down, thoughts crowded, never once looking back.

That moment passed without announcing itself.

I will reveal this in future that how I got to know this.

In future she told me she had called me three times. That she was waiting for me. That she wanted to talk that day.

And that I never turned back.

At that time, I didn't know it.

I thought I was choosing responsibility.

I didn't realize I was also choosing distance.

After the Hindi exam, she texted me.

She asked if we could talk.

I didn't overthink it this time. I didn't ask for clarity or labels. I told her honestly that if we couldn't be in a relationship, then at least we could talk. Give time to each other. Take care of each other in small ways. I said that much was enough for me.

She replied, "Yes. We can do this."

There was no excitement in her words. No hesitation either. Just acceptance. And for the first time since that no, something softened between us.

We started talking again after that. Slowly. Naturally. Not as people trying to fix something, but as two people choosing not to disappear from each other's lives. It felt lighter. Safer. Less demanding.

A few days passed like this.

And then, without warning, without planning, she took the step I hadn't asked for yet.

We talked like normal people pretending to be fine.

During my exam days, conversations continued like this. In between revisions, stress, and half-slept nights, she existed quietly on my screen. Not demanding. Not distant. Just present.

Then, in the middle of one such conversation, she stopped me.

"Alright, listen."

I replied, "Yes?"

And then she said it.

"I love you."

For a second, my mind went completely blank.

Not because I didn't feel it.
But because I wasn't prepared to hear it like that.
Not now.
Not after everything.

I had still been carrying feelings for her. I had already decided that I would try once more, this time properly, this time on WhatsApp. I wanted to say it first. I wanted control over the moment. Instead, she took it away without knowing.

So I told her that.

I said I wanted to propose first.

She replied jokingly, with a laughing emoji, and said she already did it.

I smiled at my screen longer than I should have.

Then I replied, “I love you too.”

And just like that, without announcements or promises, we were in a relationship.

No celebration.
No dramatic happiness.

Just relief.

That night, I slept peacefully.
Even during exam days.

For the first time in a while, my mind rested before my body did.

Later, I would understand that relationship and love was new for her. That it was her first time standing inside something like this, choosing it without guidance or certainty. But at that moment, all I knew was this:

She didn’t stay out of obligation.

She came back by choice.

After that, things felt unreal in a quiet way.

Mid-December passed like a dream I didn’t question. We were happy, and for once, happiness didn’t demand explanation. Conversations flowed easily. Smiles came without effort. I stopped bracing myself for loss. For a while, I just existed inside it.

Then something unsettled me.

Manav, her best friend, casually mentioned something that didn’t sound casual to me at all. He told me that Anna used to feed him her lunch with her spoon. The way he said it was light, almost careless. But the words hit me hard.

It shook me.

I asked her about it directly. She didn’t deny it. She said they were just friends, that it was normal, casual, nothing to think about.

Maybe in some places it is.

But where I came from, where we were standing, it wasn't.

In India, boundaries are unspoken but deeply understood. And this crossed one I didn't know how to ignore. Still, I didn't accuse her. I didn't fight. I told Manav not to repeat it again. I asked Anna not to do such things anymore.

She agreed.

And after that, nothing else felt wrong. Everything else stayed good. Almost too good.

Around the same time, something else began happening.

Whenever my Class 12th section passed by her classroom in a line, usually on the way to the chemistry lab, her class would be silent at first. But the moment they noticed me, the room would erupt. Hooting. Teasing. Noise directed entirely at me.

For someone who had always stayed invisible, who had always blended into the background, this kind of attention felt strange.

Heavy.
Exposing.

But also… intoxicating.

I didn't know it then, but that was the first time I felt something like presence. Like people noticed when I entered a space. Like my name carried weight outside my own head.

Later, I would learn to call it confidence.

Back then, all I knew was this:
I felt something people now call "aura."

My exams were over by then.

December moved toward its end, and school shifted into a different rhythm. Being a convent school, Christmas celebrations were held a few days before the actual date. Decorations went up. Classrooms loosened. Teachers softened. Laughter felt easier during those days.

After the celebrations, winter vacation began. That familiar pause where everyone promises to meet again, knowing it will only happen in the next year.

She wasn't there for the last few working days.

She had fallen sick with typhoid and had stopped coming to school. Because of that, I didn't see her again that year. There was no proper goodbye. No last glance across a corridor. Just absence settling in quietly.

Then came New Year's.

Her birthday.

A date I don’t forget.

I wished her first. She replied warmly. The conversation felt different that night. Softer. More intentional. Somewhere between midnight wishes and quiet confessions, we promised each other something that felt simple at the time.

That we would stay.

Not loudly.
Not dramatically.

Just… stay.

We entered 2023 holding that promise between us, believing it was enough to protect what we had. I didn’t know then how fragile words become once time starts testing them.

But that night, hope felt clean.

And that felt like a good way to begin a year.

School reopened on 2nd January.

The corridors filled again. Shoes scraped floors. Voices returned. A new year began in uniforms that still felt the same.

She came that day wearing the same dress she had sent me pictures of the night before, from her birthday celebration at home. I noticed it immediately. From a distance.

I didn’t think. I reacted.

I rushed down the stairs before fear could catch up with me. When I reached her, I wished her happy birthday again and held out my hand. She smiled and shook it.

That was the first time we touched.

It was brief. Ordinary. And somehow, it stayed with me longer than it should have.

Later, once again, I held her hand. I don’t remember when. I don’t remember why. Only that it happened, quietly, without ceremony, the way moments do when they don’t know they’ll be remembered.

Our bond grew stronger after that. Not loudly. Not suddenly. Just steadily, like something being built without instructions.

At some point, I told her something I hadn’t said out loud before. I admitted that when I first noticed her, attraction came before understanding. That it began with the body reacting faster than the heart.

But I also told her this.

That with time, something else had taken its place. That what I felt now wasn’t just wanting her, but caring about her. Thinking about her even when nothing physical was possible. Feeling unsettled at the thought of losing her.

She listened.

We said “I love you” more freely after that. Sometimes softly. Sometimes without thinking. And like people who don’t yet know how endings work, we promised each other something dangerous.

That we would never leave.
No matter what.

At that time, it didn’t feel like a promise.
It felt like a fact.

We were becoming comfortable with each other in ways that felt private, even when nothing physical happened.

By then, she already knew about Shasi. I had told her earlier, when she had asked for time after my proposal. Sometimes, casually, Anna would ask about her. I answered honestly, without hesitation. It didn’t feel threatening. It felt like trust.

Our conversations started changing too.

Nights stretched longer than before. Words slowed down. Messages became less about the day and more about pauses between replies. Sometimes, romantic imaginations/talks. Sometimes, a single line stayed on the screen longer than it should have.

There were conversations we never spoke about in daylight.

Nothing graphic. Nothing that needed explanation. Just a shared understanding that we were crossing from innocence into awareness, guided more by curiosity than intention. It felt new. It felt thrilling. And because we didn’t fully understand it, it felt powerful.

One night, we decided on something that felt daring in its own quiet way.

An indirect kiss.

She said she would bring a bottle of water to school. She would drink from it first, lips resting there longer than necessary. During a break, when we met like we always did, she would hand it to me. I would drink from the same place. And when she returned to her class, she would do the same again.

It sounds small.

But back then, it wasn’t.

It was closeness without touch.
Intimacy without courage.
Desire learning how to disguise itself as play.

We met in every break anyway. Sometimes only for seconds. Sometimes just enough to exchange a look that said more than we were ready to say aloud.

That bottle was never about water.

It was about how far we could go without admitting we wanted more.

At that time, it felt harmless. Almost sweet.

I didn't yet understand that moments like these don't stay contained. They quietly raise expectations. And expectations, when misunderstood, become pressure.

The next day, it happened.

Exactly the way we had imagined it. No hesitation. No interruption. No complications. Just a small, shared moment passing unnoticed by everyone else.

And it felt right.

Later, I told Akshay about it. I didn't make it dramatic. I said it casually, the way people do when something matters to them more than they want to admit.

He laughed.

He called it cringe.

I didn't argue. I didn't defend it either. His words didn't land anywhere inside me. For once, someone else's opinion didn't get a vote.

Because what mattered wasn't how it sounded from the outside. It was how it felt to me. And for the first time, I didn't feel the need to explain that to anyone.

Everything was good. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

But small things began to bother me.

During the day, her friends were almost always around her. She was rarely alone. Laughter followed her. People circled her space easily. I noticed it, but I didn't question it. Daytime didn't feel like something I had the right to interfere with.

Nights were different.

When we shared quiet moments, when conversations slowed and felt personal, notifications would interrupt. Messages from her friends. Some teasing. Some gossip. Some just checking in. And slowly, her replies to me began to stretch.

I told her once, carefully, that it bothered me. I asked her not to talk to them at night. Not because I wanted control, but because those moments felt like the only time that belonged to us.

She didn't agree.

She said she could talk to multiple people at once. That it wasn't difficult for her. She said it lightly, almost proudly. As if being needed by many was a skill.

It felt like a flex.

I didn’t argue.

Not because I agreed.
But because I was afraid.

Afraid that pushing too much would make her pull away. Afraid that asking for exclusivity would sound like insecurity. Afraid of losing something I had only just begun to hold.

So I stayed quiet. I adjusted myself instead.

Around the same time, she told me something else. She asked me not to tell anyone in Class 9th that we were in a relationship. She didn’t explain much. Just that it was better this way.

I said okay.

Again.

At that time, it didn’t feel like hiding.

It felt like protecting what we had.

I didn’t realize then that every time I chose silence over discomfort, I was teaching myself to accept less than I wanted.

My younger brother studied in the same school.

One day, casually, without knowing what he was stepping into, he told me something. He said Anna was always surrounded by boys. He said it like an observation, not a complaint. Then he laughed and added that I should tell her not to pull my cheeks so often.

I laughed too.

Anna knew he was my brother. My brother knew we were in a relationship. It all felt harmless. I even joked about it later, turning it into teasing instead of concern. That was easier.

But not everything stayed harmless.

One evening, Abhi and I were at Manav’s house. While sitting there, I picked up Manav’s tablet casually. I wasn’t searching for anything. I wasn’t suspicious yet. And then, without meaning to, I saw it.

Chats.

Between Manav and Anna.

They were calling each other names that didn’t belong to friendship.
Baby.
Darling.

Something inside me snapped instantly.

I confronted them both. My anger wasn't loud, but it was sharp. They told me it was nothing serious. Just friendly talk. Just jokes. They said I was overthinking.

I didn't believe them.

I warned both of them. Clear. Firm. That this couldn't continue.

After that, Anna and I fought. Properly. For the first time, it wasn't discomfort or silence. It was conflict. Voices dropped. Explanations overlapped. Emotions collided. Eventually, she managed to calm me down. She said the right things. Enough to settle me.

But the doubt didn't leave.

Another thing had already been bothering me for a while.

She rarely sent me her photos.

Not casually. Not willingly. Every time, I had to ask. Then ask again. Then wait. Sometimes days passed. When she did send one, it felt earned rather than shared.

She said she didn't look good. That she didn't like clicking photos. That she wasn't comfortable.

I tried to understand.

Calls were the same.

I understood why she avoided them. Her parents were strict. Fear made sense there. I didn't push much. Once, she got the chance and called mel. We barely spoke. Saying nothing important. We both were nervous for first time on call, no matter we had talked face to face already.

But photos didn't have parents involved. She was alone at home sometimes. Still, the distance remained.

I didn't question it openly.

I adjusted again.

Looking back, I can see the pattern clearly. I was always requesting. Waiting. Settling. Convincing myself that patience was maturity.

At that time, I thought love meant understanding everything.

I didn't realize I was slowly unlearning how to ask for what I needed.

Then something happened that neither of us was prepared for.

Her Terminal 2 results came out.

At home, marks were never just marks for her. Her parents measured her worth through ranks. Top three. Top five. Anything below that felt like failure to them.

This time, she didn't meet their expectations. I don't remember the exact rank, maybe seventh. I only remember what followed.

As punishment, her phone was taken away.

At first, I didn't know this.

She just disappeared.

No replies. No goodnight. No explanation. One day she was there, the next day she wasn't. I found out later, either through Manav or because she had mentioned it briefly the night before her results. I don't remember exactly how I learned it.

What I remember clearly is how it felt.

The silence hit harder than any fight we had before.

I worried constantly. I checked my phone without reason. I replayed our last conversations, searching for mistakes. I forgot every flaw I had noticed in her. Every discomfort. Every doubt.

All I felt was her absence.

Around the same time, for our Class 12th preparation, holidays were announced. School stopped temporarily. Which meant I didn't even get to see her from a distance. No corridors. No passing glances. No accidental moments.

Just emptiness.

Loneliness grew louder in that silence. Anxiety returned quietly. The kind that doesn't scream, but tightens your chest and shortens your breath. I was afraid.

Afraid that distance would change her.
Afraid that silence would make her forget me.
Afraid that while I was missing her, she might be slowly moving on.

In that phase, I realized something uncomfortable about myself.

I wasn't just missing her.

I was depending on her presence to feel stable.

And I didn't yet know how dangerous that could become.

A few days later, Abhi and I decided to go to school.

Officially, we needed to ask doubts. In reality, Abhi needed a reason to go. He had a crush. Someone from Class 10th. A girl named Sumita. He didn't say much about it, but I could tell he wanted a companion more than confidence.

There was another detail I noticed then, one I didn't give much importance to at the time. Aarush, Anna's cousin, also liked Sumita. It felt like an unnecessary coincidence, so I stored it away without questioning it.

That detail would matter later.

We reached school and told the teachers we had come to clear doubts. They didn't question it much. It was believable enough. Holidays had already blurred discipline.

I saw Anna.

She looked fine.

When I asked how she was, she said she was alright. Calm. Normal. She was happy to see me. She told me that her parents would give her phone every Saturday, and then take it back again on Sunday evening.

That information felt like relief.

Limited, but predictable.
Restricted, but not erased.

At least now, silence had a reason.

We asked a few doubts from the teacher for formality. Enough to justify our presence. Then we left and went back home.

There wasn't much time to process anything, because the next day was already waiting.

Class 12th farewell.

Organized by the Class 11th students.

That day gave me relief.

Not complete freedom. Not certainty. Just enough reassurance to breathe again. She was okay. There was a system now. Saturdays. Sundays. Silence with reasons. I told myself I could handle that.

We came back home and shifted our focus to something lighter. The Class 12th farewell was the next day, organized by the Class 11th students. Clothes were discussed. Songs were forwarded. Group chats came alive again. For a moment, life felt ordinary.

Balanced.

I went back to studying. To preparing. To pretending that stability had returned.

Looking back, I understand what that phase really was.

Not peace.

Just a pause.

A quiet space before things began asking harder questions.
Before effort turned into expectation.
Before love started demanding things neither of us knew how to give.

At that time, I believed we had survived the worst.

I didn't know yet
that this Chapter was never about happiness.

It was about learning how easily fear can disguise itself as love.

Chapter 7: The Day I Wasn't Chosen

Description: *Between exams, festivals, and forced calm, understanding is stretched too far. When honesty finally arrives, it does not heal, it divides. This chapter marks the realization that love cannot survive where only one person is still choosing.*

The night before farewell didn't feel heavy.
It felt restless.

We were all on our phones, one chat bleeding into another. Who was wearing what. Who was excited. Who was pretending not to be. Plans were made without structure, just energy bouncing back and forth, like we were trying to convince ourselves that this day mattered because it was ending something.

Morning came quicker than expected.

Akshay and I left together. The sky looked ordinary, which felt unfair. Farewell days are supposed to announce themselves. This one didn't. It was a Saturday, but not a normal one. The school had declared a half day. All students would disperse early, and only after that would we be allowed inside for the farewell celebration.

The corridors felt half-alive. Students moving out instead of settling in. Laughter mixed with impatience. Everyone rushing toward the gate, toward freedom.

That's when I saw her.

Anna.

She was there during dispersal, moving with her friends, almost out of reach already. I didn't think. I just walked up to her and asked, quietly, for a photo.

Our first photo.

She froze.

"No, no, no," she said quickly, almost panicked. Then her voice softened. She told me that if any of her father's friends saw us together, it would create problems for her. The words weren't dramatic. They were careful. Practiced. Like something she had learned to say to protect herself.

Before I could respond, she moved toward the gate and went outside.

I stood there for a moment, holding nothing.
Not anger.
Not sadness.
Just disappointment that didn't know where to go.

Manav walked past just then. I told him what had happened, how I had asked, how she had said no, how she had left. He didn't say much. He just nodded and went after her.

I didn't wait.

I walked toward the reception area, pretending that this didn't affect me, pretending that farewell energy would carry me anyway. But it hadn't yet. My excitement felt paused, like something buffering.

Then I saw them again.

Manav was coming back inside.

With Anna.

She walked straight toward me and said, "Take photo fast."

No explanations.
No apologies.
Just urgency.

I didn't frame it properly. I didn't check the angle. I didn't think. She just lifted my phone and clicked. One photo. Random. Imperfect. Ours.

And just like that, something shifted.

My mood lifted, suddenly, without permission. The disappointment dissolved into relief. That one photo was enough. Not because it was perfect, but because it existed.

For the first time, we were captured together.

And with that single, hurried moment, I walked into the farewell celebration lighter than I had been a few minutes earlier, carrying a memory no one else knew the weight of.

For now, that was enough.

Farewell Party went the way people hope these things will.

Loud, careless, alive.

Everyone was smiling. Phones were everywhere. Photos being clicked without purpose, just proof that the moment had happened. People danced without rhythm, joked without filters, revisited memories as if they were afraid they might evaporate by morning. Teachers softened. Students forgot ranks, sections, rivalries. For a few hours, we were only people standing at the edge of something ending. But Asha and me didn't even talked to each other.

I was happy.
Not loudly.
But honestly.

When I returned home, the noise stayed behind, but the feeling didn't. Anna had already got her phone back. Saturdays were like that. Temporary permissions. Borrowed freedom.

We texted.

I sent her the photo. The one we had clicked in a rush. No framing. No second take. Just us, slightly off-center, slightly blurred, real. I told her about that moment again. How it had lifted my mood. How that single click had changed my entire farewell.

She smiled through text. I could feel it.

Then Sunday came.

Her phone was taken away again.

This time, it didn't feel sudden. We knew the pattern by now. We said bye properly. Not dramatically. Just the kind of goodbye that assumes a return.

After that, I did something without announcing it to anyone.

I stopped.

I didn't use WhatsApp.
I didn't open Instagram.
No scrolling. No stories. No replies.

Nothing.

I only used YouTube. And phone calls. Only family. Nothing that would show green dots or last-seens or availability to the world.

It wasn't a rule.
It wasn't a vow.
It was just… alignment.

My friends noticed. They always do. Someone saw my last seen frozen in time. Messages stayed delivered. Not seen. They asked.

I told them simply: she doesn't have her phone for now, so I won't use mine either.

That was all.

No justification.
No explanation.

When Anna got her phone back, she saw it. My silence. My absence mirroring hers. Manav told her too, how I hadn't been online, how I had stayed away deliberately.

She was amazed.

She told me something honestly, without sweetness coating it. She said that if my phone had been taken, she wouldn't have stopped using hers. She said it casually, not cruelly. Just truth, spoken without knowing it would land heavily.

I read it.
And then I replied.

I told her it wasn't an expectation.
It wasn't something I wanted back in return.

I told her it was just my way of showing love.

Not grand gestures.
Not declarations.
Just choosing absence when presence wasn't possible.

She didn't argue with that.

And I didn't need her to.

For me, that choice already meant something.

February arrived quietly, but it didn't stay that way for long.

My younger uncle's wedding was on the calendar, and days before it, the house began changing shape. Guests started arriving. Rooms filled. Conversations overlapped. Luggage appeared in corners again, just like it always does before something big. The house didn't belong to routine anymore. It belonged to preparation.

At the same time, my board exams had started.

From 13th February, my focus was supposed to be only one thing. Papers. Timetables. Revisions that pretended to be enough. Life, as usual, didn't wait for exams to end before happening alongside them.

I met her on the 13th.

Not for long. Not with intention. Just a moment that existed between schedules, between urgency. Seeing her felt grounding, like touching something familiar before stepping into uncertainty.

The next day was 14th February.

My second board exam.

Valentine's Day didn't feel like a celebration that year. It felt quieter. Almost inappropriate, sitting between exams and wedding chaos. Still, the date carried weight whether I wanted it to or not.

In school, before the exam, I asked her.

Not dramatically.
Not with preparation.

Just one sentence.

"Will you be my Valentine?"

She replied quickly.

"I'm already."

There was no pause after that. No follow-up. No clarification. The bell rang, and life moved forward like it always does, indifferent to what had just been said.

I went for my exam.

I didn't sit there thinking about Valentine's Day. I didn't replay the sentence again and again. The paper demanded attention, and for those few hours, questions replaced emotions. Pen moved. Pages turned. Time passed.

Her final exams were going to start in a few days.

Which meant one thing I already knew too well.

Her phone was taken away.

Not temporarily this time.
Permanently.
Till her exams got over.

There was no goodbye conversation stretched into comfort. No last reassurance. Just an understanding that silence was about to return, carrying reasons strong enough that I couldn't argue with them.

Wedding preparations continued at home. Exams continued at school. And somewhere between rituals and revision, she disappeared from my screen again.

This time, I didn't chase the quiet.

I already knew its shape.

And I stepped into it, carrying everything unsaid, letting time do what it always does best, move forward without asking who was ready.

Boards don't run continuously.
They leave gaps.
Enough space to rest. Enough space to think. Enough space for doubt to grow legs.

My exams were scattered across days. Class 9th exams were running at the same time. Everyone was tired, stressed, half-present. Silence had become normal again, but this silence felt different. It wasn't agreed upon. It was imposed.

One day, Abhi, Manav, and I met.

Nothing formal. Just three people killing time between exams, pretending not to feel the pressure. At some point, I brought her up. Not emotionally. Casually. Like someone testing a wound to see if it still hurts.

I asked Manav to do something small.
To ask Anna if she missed me.
To tease her a little.
To remind her of me.

It sounds childish when written down. I know that. But at that time, it felt harmless. I wasn't asking him to interfere. I wasn't asking him to fight for me. I just wanted proof that I still existed in her mind when I wasn't available on her screen.

The next day, he did exactly that.

And everything went wrong.

Anna shouted at him.

Not irritation.
Not discomfort.
Shouted.

She told him he had exams. That he should focus on studying instead of nonsense. Her reaction wasn't proportional to the act. It was sharp, sudden, defensive. Manav was confused. He didn't understand why a name could trigger that much anger.

After the exam, she pulled him aside.

She told him not to say my name again.
Not in front of everyone.
Not at all.

That sentence changed everything.

Because concern sounds different.
Boundaries sound different.
This sounded like erasure.

Up until now, silence could still be explained. Exams. Parents. Pressure. But this? This wasn't silence caused by absence. This was silence being enforced.

It felt like something had happened in those 7 to 10 days of no communication.

Something I wasn't present for.
Something I wasn't informed about.
Something that had already started changing how she reacted to my name.

And here's where the argument becomes unavoidable.

If nothing had changed, my name wouldn't need to be removed from conversations.
If I was still "us," my existence wouldn't feel like a disruption.
If I mattered the same way, saying my name wouldn't require correction.

I hadn't fought with her.
I hadn't accused her.
I hadn't even spoken to her.

And yet, somehow, I had become something that needed to be shut down.

That's when I stopped blaming timing.

Because exams don't make you erase people.
Fear doesn't make you shout at names.
Silence doesn't turn hostile on its own.

Something had shifted in her world while I was busy being patient.

And the worst part?

I had no access to the moment it happened.
No message.
No warning.
No explanation.

Just the after-effects.

This wasn't misunderstanding anymore.
This was distance being actively maintained.

Between those 7 to 10 days, something had occurred. Maybe a conversation. Maybe pressure. Maybe a decision. I didn't know what.

But I knew this much with certainty:

Whatever had happened,
I wasn't part of it.

And for the first time, the question wasn't *what went wrong*.

It was their last exam.

Mine wasn't.

My second last paper was Hindi, scheduled for the afternoon. Their exam was in the morning. The timelines didn't overlap, but the consequences did.

While entering school, before I could even settle into myself, Abhi's phone rang. He looked at the screen, hesitated for half a second, then handed the phone to me.

It was Manav.

His voice didn't warm up. He didn't build context.

He said it straight.

"She wants to break up. Her parents know."

That was it.

No explanation.
No details.
Just a sentence heavy enough to bend the day.

I froze.

I don't remember walking to the exam hall. I don't remember sitting down properly. I don't remember opening the paper with intention. My hands were writing, but my mind wasn't present. Fear sat in my chest, tight and uncooperative. I couldn't breathe deeply. Thoughts kept colliding with each other.

Breakup.
Parents.
Know.

Still, somehow, I wrote.

I don't know what I wrote. I don't know how I structured answers. I don't know what version of me took over. All I know is this: later, when the results came, I had scored the highest marks in Hindi across all subjects.

To this day, I don't understand how.

I came back home empty. Not sad yet. Just hollow. Like something had been removed without permission.

Her exams were over.

She had her phone back.

I asked her what had happened.

She refused to tell me.

She said, “After two or three days.”
She said, “You have your last exam.”
She said, “I’ll tell you after that.”

That answer wasn’t protective.
It was evasive.

And here’s where I stopped accepting excuses quietly.

Because how was I supposed to focus on my last exam without clarity? How was I supposed to study physics, the toughest paper, while carrying the possibility of an ending I wasn’t allowed to understand?

I told her that.

I requested her to talk.

Not to fix things.

Not to fight.

Just to tell the truth.

Finally, she did.

She said her parents knew that she loved someone. They didn’t know my name. They didn’t know details. They only knew enough to warn her. To tell her not to do “these things.” To end it.

And just like that, the sentence rewrote everything.

Because now the truth was exposed.

Her parents didn’t know *me*.
But they knew *someone*.

Someone she loved.

And I wasn’t told that I was that someone.

I broke.

Not loudly.
Not in messages.

Internally.

She told me again to focus on studies. To be strong. To do well. I nodded through text like I always did.

I did focus. I forced myself to.

But every time I texted her after that, her replies felt mechanical. She replied, but she didn't engage. She responded, but she didn't stay. Avoidance dressed up as politeness.

That hurt more than silence.

Because silence has distance.
Replies without presence have rejection.

Still, I chose discipline over collapse.

Physics was waiting.

And for now, I did the only thing that still made sense.

I focused on my studies.

Not because I was okay.

But because I had already learned that my life doesn't pause just because my heart is breaking.

And somewhere in that realization, something hardened inside me.

I was no longer just afraid of losing her.

I was starting to understand that I might already have.

My exams ended.

Just like that, the pressure lifted. Not gently, but suddenly, the way things do when they've been weighing on you longer than you realized. We were free. And we acted like it.

We enjoyed ourselves the way only people at the end of school can. We did scribbling on shirt, argued over words that didn't matter, laughed too loudly. We wrote on each other's shirts, names, jokes, half-serious promises. We played Holi early, because March was already there and none of us wanted to wait.

I remember touching that shirt and thinking about last year.
Holi.
Shasi.
The first breakup.

Memory has a cruel sense of timing.

We promised to keep those shirts forever. Not because cloth lasts, but because moments don't.

I went home.

That night, Anna and I talked properly. Not smoothly, but honestly. She told me she didn't want to break up. That whatever was happening wasn't about lack of feeling. She said it was about safety. Ours. Hers. A word that had started replacing everything else.

I believed her. Or maybe I needed to.

When we had clicked photos on farewell, I showed one to my mom. She looked at it calmly. No panic. No anger. She told me one thing.

“Be in limits. Do whatever you want.”

That sentence stayed with me. Because it gave me freedom, but also responsibility. And suddenly, I started worrying about what I would say to mumma about breakup. How I would explain myself. How I would hold space for her fear without shrinking myself.

But she started avoiding me.

Replies came late.
Sometimes they didn’t come at all.
She was online, but my messages stayed unseen.
Or seen, but unanswered.

That hurt in a way I wasn’t prepared for.

Because this wasn’t forced silence anymore.
This was choice.

Holi passed.

After that, my family and I went to Dehradun and Mussoorie. It was meant to celebrate the end of school life. Mountains. Cold air. New places. A pause before whatever came next.

I told myself it would help me divert my mind.

It didn’t.

I missed her everywhere. In hotel rooms. On roads. While pretending to smile for family photos. Distance didn’t erase her. It only gave her more space inside my head.

When we returned, nothing had changed.

The distance remained.
The avoidance continued.

And this is where I made a mistake.

A real one.

I decided to do something reckless. Not to hurt myself, but to test something I shouldn’t have tested. I made fake blood using red pen ink and drew it on my wrist. I sent the photo to Abhi and Manav.

Why?

Because I wanted a reaction.
Because I wanted emotion to surface.
Because I wanted her to choose love over fear.

I thought if she saw concern, panic, urgency, something real would finally come out.

That was wrong.

Akshay found out.
Everyone got worried.
Messages came fast. Calls. Panic.

Akshay and Abhi told me we would meet the next day.

Anna texted me.

She wasn't soft.
She wasn't scared.

She was disappointed.
Angry.
Hurt.

And she was right to be.

Now the situation had slipped out of control. People were going to see my wrist the next day. The lie was becoming dangerous. So I corrected it the worst possible way, quietly and stupidly. With a needle, I made a small mark on my wrist, just enough to justify concern without causing harm.

The next day, I told Abhi and Akshay the truth. That it was small. That it wasn't what they feared. Slowly, relief replaced panic.

But damage doesn't reverse just because fear settles.

When I texted Anna after that, she was still angry. Still distant. And this time, the distance felt deliberate. Calculated. As if she was slowly stepping back, not out of confusion, but out of decision.

And this is where the argument becomes unavoidable.

What I did wasn't love.
It was fear disguised as urgency.

I wasn't trying to communicate.
I was trying to force clarity.

And that never works.

I wanted her to choose me.
Instead, I gave her another reason to pull away.

From here, the story stops being about misunderstanding and starts being about consequences. Not hers. Mine.

Because love doesn't grow under pressure.
And fear, once triggered, doesn't turn into reassurance.

It turns into distance.

And I could feel her moving further away, one careful step at a time, while I stood there realizing too late that I had crossed a line I couldn't uncross.

From here on, nothing breaks suddenly.

It erodes.

Slowly.

After everything that had already broken between us, I sent one last message.

Not dramatic.
Not emotional.
Just final in its own quiet way.

I told her I wouldn't bother her anymore. That it was her Class 10th year and she should focus on her boards. I told her that if she ever missed me, she could text. And if she ever needed me, for anything, I would still be there.

She replied simply.

"Okk. I will be in touch."

And after that, I stopped.

I didn't text her.
I didn't check in.
I didn't remind her of myself.

I gave her space, the kind people say they want when they don't know how to ask for distance honestly.

One month passed.

No text from her.

Mid-April came, and silence started feeling heavier than restraint. So I texted her once, just to ask how she was doing. She replied politely. Calmly. She said she was fine.

But something felt off.

She was sweet. Too sweet. Like someone performing normalcy instead of living it. I didn't argue. I didn't push. I just noticed.

The next morning, Abhi and I went to Manav's house.

I picked up his tablet with intention. With suspicion. And then I saw it.

A message from her.

“Krish messaged me. My life always goes on track and then something happens.”

That sentence didn’t scream.
It didn’t accuse.

It quietly erased me.

In that moment, I understood something painful and clear.

She wasn’t confused about me.
She wasn’t struggling with feelings.

She was tolerating me.

Pretending to be fine. Pretending to be kind. Pretending that my presence was neutral, when in reality, it disrupted the order she wanted.

I went home and texted her.

“Hey, do you have a few minutes for me?”

She replied, “Sure.”

I asked her about the message she had sent Manav the day before.

She tried to soften it immediately. Said she didn’t mean it like that. Said it was misunderstood. Said it wasn’t serious.

That’s when something inside me snapped cleanly.

I told her, “If you are not serious, then I am a fool who wasted my time on you.”

Her reply came fast. Unfiltered.

“I didn’t tell you to waste your time on me.”

That sentence broke whatever was still holding.

Because it rewrote everything. Every wait. Every adjustment. Every sacrifice. It turned choice into stupidity and patience into my mistake alone.

I didn’t argue after that.

I didn’t explain.

I just replied, “I hate you.”

And I blocked her on WhatsApp.

When I opened Instagram to block her there too, a message was already waiting.

“I hate you more.”

That was the last thing she ever said to me at that point.

And that’s where this Chapter ends.

Not with understanding.
Not with closure.

But with two people choosing cruelty over honesty, because honesty had already been avoided for too long.

From here on, it isn’t about love or loss anymore.

It’s about what stays with you after both have failed.

Chapter 8: Between Departures

Description: *Life resumes through exams, travel, and routine, but the mind lingers in the quiet after loss. In the middle of movement and family, something unexpected interrupts the calm — a reminder that some stories don't end cleanly.*

After that, there was nothing left to wait for.

No messages.
No explanations.
No second chances disguised as politeness.

I didn't feel dramatic sadness. I felt displaced. Like something I had been standing on quietly disappeared, and I was already falling before I noticed.

I felt broken, but not in a way that demanded attention. More like something cracked and kept functioning anyway.

Some days, the weight showed up without warning. My chest would tighten in the middle of ordinary moments. Breathing felt shallow, like my body was preparing for something it couldn't name. My heartbeat raced even when nothing around me had changed. No danger. No urgency. Just noise inside.

Some days, the weight showed up without warning. My chest would tighten in the middle of ordinary moments. Breathing felt shallow, like my body was preparing for something it couldn't name. My heartbeat raced even when nothing around me had changed. No danger. No urgency. Just noise inside.

Around that time, the ring came back into my hand.

A silver tortoise ring. Small. With a blue stone set into it. It had always been mine. My grandma had given it to me long before any of this began. I used to wear it without thinking, without assigning meaning to it.

At some point during the relationship, I gave it to Anna.

I don't remember the exact moment. I only remember that it felt natural then. Like passing something personal without realizing what it would cost to get it back.

After the breakup, She gave it to Manav to return it to me. He handed it back to me quietly. No context. No conversation. Just the ring, finding its way home.

I held it longer this time.

It didn't feel like a symbol of love anymore.
It felt like something that had survived me making it mean too much.

I put it back where it belonged.

Not as a memory.
Just as mine.

And still, life didn't pause.

Applications opened. Forms needed to be filled. Deadlines appeared one after another. Engineering entrances. Different colleges. Different cities. I spent my days moving from one form to the next, typing my name, my details, my marks, over and over again, until it stopped feeling personal.

By June 2023, this became my routine.

One evening, my younger uncle mentioned a college. The one he had graduated from. He spoke about placements, about faculty, about how supportive the environment was. He didn't try to convince me. He just said it like information that had waited long enough to be shared.

So I filled that form too.

The college was located between Modinagar and Muradnagar, close to Ghaziabad. A place I had no emotional connection with. Just coordinates on a map. Possibility, nothing more.

I went there with my grandma.

The entrance exam happened quickly. The admission followed on the same day, almost without resistance. Signatures. Fees. Confirmation. A future decided faster than most feelings ever were.

After that, we went to Shimla.

Not to celebrate loudly. Just to breathe.

Mountains have always done that for me. They don't ask questions. They don't rush you toward answers. They just stay where they are, and somehow that makes everything else feel less urgent.

I had time at home until late July.

Enough time to sit with silence again.
Enough time to understand that something had ended, and something else was starting, without asking whether I was ready.

A new life was waiting.

Not gently.
Just… waiting.

I still had a few days left at home.

Mumma noticed it before I said anything. One afternoon, casually, like it wasn't a big moment, she asked me what I liked to eat. She told me to name things properly. Lunch or dinner, it didn't matter. She would make it.

I told her.
She remembered all of it.

Those meals didn't feel like farewells. They felt normal. And maybe that's why they stayed with me longer than anything dramatic could have. Food appeared on the table the way it always had. No speeches. No advice. Just care doing what it knows how to do.

The date I was supposed to reach my hostel was 31st July.

But plans changed.

My father decided we would leave on the 28th instead. Two extra days. One day to go to Vrindavan, to visit the temple and take blessings. One day after that to rest. Then the hostel on the 31st.

No one asked whether I was ready.
They just adjusted the schedule.

Most of my packing was already done, so leaving didn't take long. Clothes folded. Bags zipped. Small things checked and rechecked. The house looked the same, even though I knew I wouldn't be waking up in it anymore.

Emotionally, I wasn't prepared.

But I wasn't completely unhappy either.

There was a strange mix settling inside me. Relief. Nervousness. A quiet excitement I didn't fully trust. I was about to step into something new. New people. New place. A different rhythm of days.

I didn't say it out loud, but somewhere inside me, I was hoping distance would do what time hadn't yet managed.

Not healing.
Just enough separation to breathe.

So we left.

Not because I was ready.
But because life had decided it was time.

It was 31st July.

My parents came to drop me at the college hostel. By then, all the paperwork was done. Forms signed. Rooms allotted. Identity slowly shifting from son to student.

When it was time for them to leave, my father said one last thing. Not loudly. Not dramatically.

He told me to stay away from **Drugs and smoking**.

That was it.
No long lecture. No warnings stacked on top of each other. Just a boundary placed quietly before distance took over.

They left.

And just like that, I was on my own.

Hostel life started faster than I expected. New faces. Shared rooms. Conversations that didn't need background checks. I made friends easily, or maybe I was just less guarded than before.

Induction programs for freshers began. Introductions. Orientation halls. Names repeated until they started sticking. From 14th August, classes officially began. My academics started moving too, slowly settling into rhythm.

The same people I met in the beginning stayed around. Friendships tightened without announcement. Late-night talks became normal. Stories started coming out.

Some talked about their love lives.
Some about breakups.
Some about mistakes they laughed about now.

At some point, I told my story too.

Surprisingly, it felt light. Not heavy. Not dramatic. Just something that belonged to the past now, spoken without shaking. We laughed at parts of it. That helped.

The first semester stretched till mid-December 2023.

In between, life didn't stay contained inside campus. I went home on my birthday. Again on Diwali. Sometimes I visited my elder aunty in Noida. Other times, with my roommate and new friends, we went out.

Delhi became familiar.
Sometimes historic places.
Sometimes malls.

Sometimes just food and walking without purpose.

It was fun. Genuinely.

Somewhere along the way, I noticed myself changing. I was opening up. Talking more. Laughing louder. Not hiding behind silence the way I used to.

There were many girls around me. Some were striking the moment they entered a room. Some revealed themselves slowly, through kindness, through how easily they laughed, through the way they listened. I noticed them. Anyone would have.

But nothing inside me moved toward them in a hurry.

My friends noticed that too.

They laughed about it. Turned it into advice. Said college life wasn't meant to be lived carefully. They spoke about relationships, hookups, friends with benefits, like they were experiences everyone had to collect. They told me to try once. Just once. As if sweetness could be scheduled.

I didn't argue with them.

I listened. I let the noise pass through me.

And when the moment came where I could have followed it, I didn't.

Not out of fear.
Out of memory.

I knew how quickly a beginning can turn into something that asks too much. How easily curiosity becomes attachment. How long it takes to put yourself back together after.

So I stayed where I was.

Not empty.
Not waiting.

Just aware.

For the first time, restraint didn't feel like loss.

It felt like I was finally holding the door instead of being pushed through it.

The semester ended, and with it came a break of around two weeks. Fourteen to eighteen days where nothing was due. No classes. No alarms. No deadlines pretending to be urgent. We felt light without knowing what to do with the feeling.

It was New Year's Eve.

My nuclear family went to Valmikinagar. Just us. Me, my younger brother, mumma, and papa. We drove around, stopped at two or three places. There was a river running fast, rocks cutting through it, water refusing to slow down. We stayed there longer than planned, watching daylight thin out.

After sunset, we went to eat the special Handi Mutton the area is known for. My father had already placed the order. He knew the person who ran the place well. Things like that move easily when connections exist.

He had also brought an alcoholic drink to celebrate the night.

I was eighteen now. Technically allowed. Not new to the taste either, though that history didn't matter much in the moment. My brother had a Sting energy drink, holding it like a privilege of his own age.

During travel to Valmikinagar, my father transferred the drink into a plain bottle to avoid any risk during security check. It was colorless. Looked like water. At some point during dinner, without realizing it, I mixed up the bottles.

I reversed the ratio.

When I tasted it, my body noticed before my mind did. I froze for half a second. Considered telling my father. Imagined the scolding. Then decided silence was easier.

So I kept drinking.

By the time dinner ended, I was high. Laughing without control. My head felt heavier than it should have. The world had softened at the edges.

My father noticed. He didn't get angry. He laughed and told my brother, half-joking, to take care of me and get me to the car.

We went home.

It was New Year now.

Before sleeping, the room still felt slightly tilted. My head hadn't settled. Out of habit more than intention, I opened WhatsApp.

That's when I saw Manav's status.

He had wished Anna a happy birthday.
Her photo was there.

I don't know why that moment cut through the noise. Alcohol blurs some things and sharpens others. The year had changed. The semester had ended. I was supposed to be elsewhere in my life now.

Still, I typed a message.

Just a birthday and new year wish.
Nothing more.

I sent it.

And then I slept, not knowing whether that message belonged to the past or had just reopened it.

The next morning, Manav replied.

He said thank you.
He wished me Happy New Year too, from her side.

That should have been enough.

But something in me still wanted the distance to feel official instead of indirect. So I asked him to tell her to unblock me. I said I would do the same. Not to talk deeply. Just to exchange wishes properly. Like normal people do.

It happened.

When we talked again, it stayed light at first. Jokes. Trolling. Familiar rhythm without depth. I told her briefly that we had broken up. No details. Just the fact.

I didn't tell her everything that followed.

After the breakup, some people had made it entertainment. Friends of hers. Friends of Manav. Questions thrown like jokes. Laughter where explanations were expected.
"Why did she leave you?"
"What did you do?"

I carried it quietly through that summer. I didn't defend myself. I didn't explain. Repeating pain felt worse than absorbing it.

When I mentioned it to her, it was only in fragments. Enough to be true. Not enough to reopen it.

She joked after that.

She told me not to fall in love with her again. Said she didn't want me hurting myself again. Said it lightly, like a reference everyone already understood.

Then she drew a line.

She said we would be friends.
And we would talk less.

Otherwise, she said, I would develop feelings again. I would start saying "I love you" again.

The words weren't sharp.
But they landed heavily.

So we talked less.

Not because it was announced.
But because distance had already learned our names.

By early February 2024, she went offline for a long time. I didn't ask why. I already knew the pattern. Her board exams were approaching. Her phone would be taken away.

One night, drunk, I sent a message to Manav. Something unnecessary. Something I wouldn't have sent sober.

For a moment, I thought I had made a mistake.

Then I told myself it didn't matter.

Life didn't wait for clarity anyway.

When the 2nd semester started, something shifted.

Nothing obvious went wrong. Classes resumed. People were the same. Routines returned. And yet, something felt off, like a sound missing from a familiar room. I wasn't unhappy in a way that demanded attention, but I wasn't settled either.

Some nights, I would call home and cry.

Not because something specific had happened. Just because staying in the hostel suddenly felt heavier than it should have. I missed my home. The kind of missing that doesn't come with images, only with discomfort.

I shared a room with Dev bhaiya, an M.Tech first-year student, senior to me as I was pursuing B.Tech, and Kishan, my classmate. Kishan and I had our registration numbers together. His came first. He sat in front

of me during exams. We worked together in labs. From the first semester itself, we had moved through college side by side, without effort. Same room. Same jokes. Same rhythm.

One afternoon, I told Kishan what I was feeling.

He didn't try to fix it. He just listened. And then he said something that sounded uncomfortably familiar. Like I was loosing a balance. He said he felt it too. Like we were missing out on something, but couldn't name what it was. Like there was a part of us that didn't fully reach our parents, and didn't fully belong with friends either.

We talked about it longer than planned.

At some point, we wondered if what we were missing was a partner. Not romance exactly. Just someone who understood without translation.

We didn't settle on an answer.

We just acknowledged the gap and moved on, the way people do when clarity isn't available.

Not long after that, exams started approaching.

And once again, routine stepped in before questions could settle.

My internal 1 examinations for second semester started soon after.

And once again, without asking whether I was settled or not, routine stepped in and took control.

My exams ended.

I remember the date clearly.
8th February 2024.

That evening, I left the hostel and went to New Delhi. I stayed at a hotel owned by someone we knew. *Rishi Guest House*. Nothing fancy. Just a place that felt temporary, which suited the moment.

My grandma arrived later that night.

My bua and her family live in Australia. She usually comes to India once every year or two, mostly to visit us. This time, her visit also lined up with a destination wedding in Uttarakhand, near Nainital, which all of us were supposed to attend together.

On the morning of 9th February, grandma and I went to the airport to receive her. Long travel clung to her face, but familiarity settled in quickly. From the airport, we went straight back to the hotel.

The rest of the day disappeared into movement.

Shopping.

One place, then another. Bags kept increasing. Conversations repeated themselves. I followed behind them, carrying whatever they bought, moving without complaint, letting the day pass through me.

I didn’t feel restless.
I didn’t feel excited either.

I was between things. Exams were over. College was paused. The wedding hadn’t begun yet. Life felt suspended, balanced carefully between what had ended and what hadn’t started.

That evening, while we were still out, my phone buzzed.

An Instagram notification.

A message request.

From a random account.
A random name.
No profile photo.

I wasn’t expecting anything.

Still, I noticed it.

And that was enough to shift the direction of the night.

Chapter 9: Where Life Resumed

Description: *After closure and coincidence, routine returns. A wedding ends, a hostel door opens, and someone from the past quietly becomes part of the present. This chapter marks the moment when personal life and daily life begin to overlap again.*

[*Reference of past*]

Before 2024 began, I tried to clean up the spaces I had left unsettled.

Not to restart anything.
Not to reclaim people.
Just to leave things without bitterness.

In December, I reached out to a few people with whom things had once ended badly. I said sorry where it felt overdue. With Asha, the conversation was brief and polite. She said she had almost forgotten everything. But the way she spoke made one thing clear. Whatever had existed between us was no longer meant to be revisited. So we stopped talking. Quietly. Naturally.

I don't remember everyone I apologized to after that. Only that the intention stayed the same. To begin the new year without unresolved weight.

On New Year's Day, I asked Manav to tell Anna to unblock me. Not to restart what had ended, but to close it properly. To leave things on neutral ground. That day, Anna asked me about Shasi. She asked whether I had ever apologized to her. Whether I had forgiven her. Or whether anything between us was still unfinished.

That question stayed with me.

Months earlier, when Anna and I had broken up in March 2023, she had told me to go back to Shasi. At that time, I couldn't. I was already emotionally attached to Anna. But now, with distance and time, the thought returned in a different form. Not as longing. As closure.

On 22nd January, I searched for Shasi's account through Naveen bhaiya's Instagram. I found it. I sent a follow request and messaged her, asking if she remembered me.

We were still out that evening of 9th February 2024. *[Continuation of chapter 8]*

My bua had just arrived from Australia, and the day had dissolved into movement. One shop after another. Streets that didn't pause. Conversations repeating themselves. Bags multiplying in my hands until they felt heavier than they should have.

Life felt suspended. Balanced between what had ended and what hadn't begun.

That's when my phone vibrated.

An Instagram notification.

A message request.

From an unknown account.

No profile photo.

No recognizable name.
Nothing that explained why it existed.

I didn't expect anything, but I noticed it anyway. Sometimes, noticing is enough to change the direction of a moment.

I opened the message.

There was no greeting. No explanation. Just silence waiting to be acknowledged. I asked the simplest thing I could.

Who are you?

The reply came after a pause.

"You messaged me."

The words didn't feel confused. They felt intentional. As if the past had been folded neatly and placed back in my hands without being opened. I stood there, bags hanging from my arms, the noise of the market continuing around me, while something old quietly surfaced.

I asked again.

This time, the reply came.

It was Shasi.

At first, I didn't take it seriously.

I thought it was Aryan. He had done things like this before, and with the destination wedding coming up, I knew he would be around. It felt believable that he was messing with me again. So instead of reacting, I decided to be sure.

I asked her to tell me something that only we knew. Something no one else could make up. She replied jokingly, saying she didn't know anything like that. I told her to say anything. Anything at all.

Then she mentioned the stairs.

The uneven stairs from that party night. The moment when she slipped slightly and I laughed while standing there. A small incident. Forgettable to everyone else. But not to us.

That was enough.

I didn't question it after that.

I told her I wasn't in a situation to talk properly. That I was outside and busy, and that I would talk once I reached the hotel. She replied that she had been waiting the whole time until I finally replied.

Even after that, she kept messaging in between.

She asked if I was okay.
She said she missed me.
She asked if we could talk.

Whenever I got a chance, I replied.

I was getting attention from Shasi. That part was clear. What wasn't clear was how I was supposed to respond to it. I wasn't shocked. I wasn't emotional. I was fine.

And because I was fine, I didn't know what to react.

So I stayed quiet when I needed to. Replied when I could. And kept moving through the evening, carrying bags in my hands, while something unexpected unfolded on my phone without asking me what I wanted it to mean.

By the time we reached the hotel, my bua, grandma, and I finally stopped moving. Bags were set down. The day loosened its grip. And for the first time, I could give the moment my full attention.

That's when we talked properly.

I asked her why she was messaging from a random, newly made account instead of her main one. She told me she didn't have access to that account anymore. When she saw there was a message from my side and that I was blocked, she realized something was wrong. That block, she said, wasn't done by her. And as soon as she understood that, she messaged me from new account.

Then I asked what had happened in the time we hadn't spoken.

I asked directly whether she had been in a relationship with someone else after breaking up with me.

She said yes.

It was Utsav.

I told her honestly that I had expected it. That in my head, it was always either Diyansh or Utsav. She didn't deny it. But she made one thing clear. She didn't want to talk about her past.

And here's where the balance matters.

You didn't push.
But you didn't retreat either.

You told her about Anna. About your side of time. She listened. She was fine with it. No defensiveness. No comparison. Just acknowledgement.

The conversation didn't feel like closure.
It didn't feel like reconciliation either.

It felt like two timelines touching briefly, without deciding whether they would overlap again.

[Note to the Reader,

This is where my story truly begins.

Everything you have read until the end of Chapter 8 was only the groundwork. The people, the attachments, the losses, the silences — they were not the destination, but the preparation. Those chapters exist to explain how I arrived here, not where I was meant to stay.

From this point onward, the story shifts. What follows is not a continuation of the past, but the beginning of the main arc. Choices start to matter differently. Consequences grow heavier. And the turns ahead are not gentle ones.

There are moments coming that will reshape how I see love, trust, myself, and the future I thought I understood.

This is not where things end.

This is where everything finally starts.]

It was the next morning.

10th February, 2024.

We woke up with simple good mornings, nothing dramatic, nothing heavy. Grandma was in the washroom, and I was still lying on the bed, phone in my hand, the room quiet in that early way hotels have. There was no rush. No one watching. Just time stretching comfortably.

We talked.

She told me she wanted to say something.

I said, go on.

She said she was afraid to say it.

I told her it was okay. That she could say it.

There was a pause. The kind that already tells you what's coming.

Then she said it.

"I love you."

I wasn't surprised. I think that matters. Somewhere inside, I had already expected this. Maybe because of how she had been talking since the previous evening. Maybe because distance makes words heavier when they finally arrive.

For her happiness, I accepted it.

I replied, "I love you too."

And just like that, without planning, without ceremony, 10th February became our anniversary. Not because we declared it loudly, but because that's how memory works. It chooses moments and brands them quietly.

Since the night before, she had been apologizing.

Again and again.

She said sorry for leaving me the way she did. Sorry for going to someone else. She said the person she went to was bad. That karma had punished her for it. I didn't interrupt her. I didn't correct her framing. I let her speak the way people do when they are trying to cleanse themselves through confession.

Then I asked her something directly.

Why did you break up with Utsav?

She didn't answer immediately. When she did, the tone changed.

She told me it happened around New Year. She said he wanted to get physical with her. She refused. She was clear about it. After that, she said, his behavior changed. He started forcing her. Pressuring her. She avoided him as much as she could.

Then she told me the part that shifted everything.

She said Utsav sent photos of them together to her mother. Just normal photos. Nothing explicit. But along with them, he told her mother a fake story. That they had gotten physical.

I remember stopping there internally.

Because with just photos, her mother believed him.

An outsider.

I didn't say it aloud, but the irony was sharp. A mother trusting a stranger's version over her own daughter's reality. That detail alone explained so much about the fear she carried.

She said her mother believed him.

I felt sympathy for her then. Genuine sympathy. I told her not to worry. That things would be okay. That this didn't define her.

But she wasn't finished.

She told me that even after everything, Utsav was still messaging her on WhatsApp. That he was blackmailing her. That he was threatening to send things to her father if she blocked him.

I told her to block him.

She said she couldn't.

She said if he sent anything to her father, her father could do anything to her. According to her, her father would kill her.

That line didn't sound exaggerated in her mouth. It sounded learned. Rehearsed. Like a fear she had been carrying long before this situation existed.

That's the moment this story **stops being about love**.

And becomes about **fear, power, and control**.

Because from here, nothing is simple anymore. Not the "I love you." Not the reunion. Not even the sympathy. Everything now exists under pressure. And pressure changes people, choices, and truths.

This is the **real beginning of the arc**.

Not because two people reunited.

But because something darker had already entered the story, and I didn't fully understood yet how much it would cost to stand inside it.

We got ready quickly.

Grandma, bua, and I moved through the room with the quiet coordination of people who had done this many times before. Bags checked. Dupattas adjusted. Phones slipped into pockets. When the taxi arrived, its horn cut through the morning stillness like a signal that the pause was over.

We sat inside. Doors shut. The engine started.

And the city began to slide past us.

As the taxi moved, I stayed on Instagram. Messages went back and forth in fragments, the way conversations do when life keeps interrupting them. She asked me not to leave her. Not as a demand. As a plea.

She said, "Please don't leave me the way I left you."

She kept saying sorry. For disappearing. For choosing someone else. For hurting me without explanation. And underneath every apology was fear. Unhidden now. Unfiltered.

Then she told me something that made the moving city outside the window blur for a moment.

She said she had tried to die.

She said she stopped because of me.

I didn't react dramatically. I didn't say the things people are expected to say in moments like that. I asked questions instead. Careful ones. Grounding ones. Because panic doesn't help when someone is already afraid.

Then I asked her something honest, something I needed to know.

“If I hadn’t messaged you in January… would you have ever messaged me?”

She didn’t dodge it.

She said yes. But not this early. She said maybe sometime in mid-2024.

That answer mattered more than she realized. It meant this reunion wasn’t accidental, but it also wasn’t urgent on her timeline. It had been waiting. Just not rushing.

Then I asked another thing that had stayed unresolved.

“Was it Utsav who blocked me in January?”

She said yes.

She told me he had access to her account back then. That he was the one who blocked me. Later, when she realized what had happened, she removed her email from that account and deleted it entirely. She said she had also changed her phone number. That’s why there was no way for her to contact me, even if she wanted to.

Until now.

I realized something quietly then. Till this moment, I didn’t even have her new number.

Now I had it.

But she told me not to call. Not to message normally. She said her mother was watching closely. Her boards were starting in a few days. She had been given the phone only to study. Every notification mattered. Every vibration could raise suspicion.

So even connection came with rules.

We reached the destination. The taxi slowed, stopped, and the door opened. The journey ended physically, but nothing inside me felt settled. We stepped out, bags in hand, while something far heavier stayed invisible, moving alongside me.

She was scared. Still.

Apologetic. Still.

And clinging to me in a way that wasn’t romantic anymore. It was survival.

That’s where this part of the story demands honesty.

This wasn’t just about two people finding each other again.
It was about fear attaching itself to love.
And love, once mixed with fear, stops being simple.

I didn’t know yet whether staying would save her or slowly undo me.

We reached the destination by evening.

It was supposed to be a two or three night stay. Nothing rushed. Nothing packed too tightly. The place was already alive when we arrived. Relatives everywhere. Familiar faces mixed with people I barely remembered but still had to greet like family.

It was first night.

We met everyone properly. Smiles. Hugs. Repeated questions. Aryan and Anika were there too. Everything felt normal on the surface. Busy enough that no one noticed anything beneath it.

Shasi messaged me in between and told me not to tell anything to Aryan or Anika. Not about us. Not about what had happened. I didn't question it. It didn't feel strange at that moment. It felt like caution, not secrecy.

The party went smoothly.

Music, laughter, movement. People drifting in and out of conversations. I stayed for most of it, but by the end, tiredness caught up with me. Not emotional tiredness. Just physical. I left early and went back to my hotel room alone.

The room was quiet when I entered. That sudden silence you feel after hours of noise. I dropped onto the bed without thinking too much.

That's when she texted again.

She said she wanted to see me. On video call.

I accepted immediately.

No hesitation. No checking surroundings. No overthinking.

The call connected.

We didn't speak much. We just looked at each other. Smiled. A few seconds passed like that. Not awkward. Not heavy. Just presence. Then the call ended naturally, without explanation, and we went back to texting.

It felt familiar. Comfortable. Like something returning to its old shape.

She replied quickly. Asked what I was doing. Told me what she was doing. Sent messages without gaps that needed explanation. Wanted to talk. Wanted to see me. Wanted to stay connected even when distance existed.

This was the version of her I remembered wanting.

The version that stayed present.
That didn't disappear mid-conversation.
That didn't make attention feel like something earned after waiting.

For now, it felt simple.

Long-distance didn't feel heavy when the effort was mutual. Video calls didn't feel like requests. Messages didn't feel like interruptions. It all flowed naturally, the way I had once imagined things were supposed to.

I didn't analyze it that night.
I didn't question why it felt so easy now.

I just let it happen.

We kept texting. About small things. About the day. About nothing important. And that nothing mattered more than it should have, because it felt stable.

Not exciting.
Not dramatic.

Just present.

And for that night, that was enough.

During the wedding days, food became part of the routine.

Heavy lunches. Late dinners. Plates refilled without asking. I ate a lot of non-veg. More than usual. I've always liked it, and during weddings, liking turns into indulgence without guilt.

She noticed.

She told me not to eat it.

Not sharply. Not angrily. Just said it, the way people do when they think they're allowed to make small requests. She was vegetarian. I knew that. I listened, but I didn't stop. I told her no, lightly, without turning it into an argument.

She was fine with it.

And that's important. She didn't insist. She didn't sulk. She let it go. It stayed a non-issue, and the conversation moved on.

The wedding ended the way weddings are supposed to.

Properly. Smoothly. Without disruption.

After that, there was nothing left to stay for. We packed again. Bags closed. Goodbyes repeated. The noise thinned out as people started leaving in different directions.

We headed back to Delhi by taxi.

The road felt familiar this time. Not tiring. Just long enough to think without needing to speak. Grandma and bua sat quietly, the kind of quiet that doesn't need explanation.

When we reached the hostel gate, they got down with me.

No drama. No advice. Just the usual reminders. Take care. Eat properly. Call when free. Then the taxi pulled away, carrying them back into a life that wasn't mine anymore.

I stood there for a moment, bag in hand, facing the gate.

From that day onward, my college routine resumed. Classes. Hostel rooms. Late nights. Ordinary things filling the day.

And somewhere inside all of that, Shasi became present.

Not as a memory.
Not as a past chapter.

But as someone who now existed inside my college days, my hostel nights, my phone between lectures, my silences after lights-out.

Without announcement, she entered my daily life.

Chapter 10: Between Fear and Faith

Description: *As routines return and futures begin to form, love learns to survive alongside uncertainty. This chapter captures a fragile balance, where staying matters more than certainty and hope waits patiently for its moment.*

Days fell into a pattern.

Wake up.
Classes.
Hostel noise.
Assignments.

And somewhere in between all of it, I had started counting.

Not lectures.
Not tests.

Days left for Holi holidays.

Each date I crossed felt like stepping one tile closer to home.

Her board exams were approaching too.

Shasi wasn't good with technology. She wasn't good in studies. She wasn't the kind of person who knew which link to trust or which site actually helped. Half the time she didn't even know how to search properly.

So I became her internet.

Every night I searched chapters, downloaded notes, watched lectures, and then simplified everything for her. I used ChatGPT to compress whole chapters into summaries she could actually understand. Important questions. Short notes. Easy explanations.

If she struggled with one topic, I stayed up until I found three ways to explain it.

Helping her didn't feel like work.

It felt like purpose.

Then, like always, something would interrupt us.

Her mother would take her phone.

Sometimes because she used it too long.
Sometimes because she watched reels.
Sometimes because her younger sister complained.

According to Shasi, her sister hated her. Always jealous. Always taunting. Waiting for her to get scolded.

She used to tell me all this with a heavy voice.

“No one supports me at home,” she once said.

So I did.

When her phone got taken, I didn’t fight it. I just waited.

Hours.

Refreshing the screen like an idiot.

Waiting for her to appear again.

And when she finally appear, it felt like breathing after being underwater.

That’s how we survived.

In gaps.
In stolen hours.
In borrowed time.

Slowly, our conversations changed too.

Less about studies.

More about feelings.

Longer nights. Softer words. The kind of talks you only have when the world is asleep and honesty feels easier.

We were still kids, pretending we understood love.

One day she sent me something personal. Something intimate. Something that crossed the line between cute and vulnerable. It was explicit photo of her.

For a second, my mind went blank.

I was surprised.

Curious.

And yeah… a part of me liked it too. I was a teenager. I wasn’t made of stone.

But almost immediately, another feeling followed.

Regret.

Heavy. Sudden. Uncomfortable.

Not because of her.

But because it felt like we had stepped somewhere we didn’t fully understand yet.

Like we were rushing into a version of “grown-up” that neither of us was ready to carry.

I told her honestly.

I said I felt weird about it. Guilty. Like maybe we shouldn’t be doing this.

She replied softly.

She said she trusted me.

She said this was normal in relationships.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe she wasn’t.

But that night, for the first time, I realized something strange about love.

Sometimes it isn’t excitement.

Sometimes it’s responsibility.

And sometimes… it’s knowing when to slow down.

By then, texting had become secondary.

Most of the time, we talked on calls.
Sometimes video calls.

Text was only for moments when voices weren’t possible.

Hearing her mattered more than reading her.

Anna’s board exams were over now.

Life around me started overlapping again, the way it always does when silence doesn’t get permission to stay private. I told Manav. I told Abhi. I told them about Shasi returning.

They didn’t keep it to themselves.

Anna found out.

She was angry.

Not loud-angry. Not dramatic.
Just sharp.

She asked me why I allowed Shasi back into my life. Why I reopened something that had already ended. Why I didn’t leave the past where it belonged.

And then she said something that sounded careless but wasn’t.

“Do whatever you want.”

That sentence carried distance inside it.

I told Shasi about this.

She didn’t hesitate.

She told me to block Anna.

I refused.

Not because I wanted Anna back.
But because I didn’t want to turn choices into cruelty.

I said it was fine. That Anna wouldn’t create problems. That things would settle on their own.

They didn’t.

When it was time for me to leave the hostel and go home for Holi, Anna messaged me again.

This time, she didn’t argue.

She asked me to block her.

I said no.

I told her if blocking had to happen, she should do it herself.

She replied calmly.

She said she didn’t want to come between me and Shasi.
She said the only way to make sure of that was for me to block her.

There was no accusation in her words.

Just resignation.

So I did it.

I blocked Anna.

I didn’t announce it.
I didn’t justify it.

I told Shasi only this much: that I had blocked Anna.

And that was it.

Around me, Holi was approaching.
Colors. Holidays. Home.

But quietly, without noise or celebration, Anna left my life.

Not with a fight.
Not with a goodbye.

Just like that.

As a friend.
Gone.

It was Holi time again.

And ever since Shasi had returned, there was one sentence she kept repeating.

“I don’t trust boys anymore.”
“I’m afraid of boys now.”

She said it often. Casually. Like something she had accepted as truth.

She told me I was different.
That I was the only exception.

On her Instagram, her world was small.

She followed me.
Her best friend, almost like a sister, Priya.
And two or three influencers.

That was it.

Until one evening, it wasn’t.

I noticed a new name in her followers.

A boy.

Manan.

I didn’t react immediately. I just asked, calmly, who he was.

She said he was a school friend.

That answer should have been simple.

It wasn’t.

Something inside me tightened, the same way it had before. Not because of jealousy, but because my mind recognized the pattern before my heart could stop it.

I had heard this sentence before.
Just a friend.

I remembered Utsav.
I remembered Diyansh.
I remembered how every story had started the same way and ended somewhere I never saw coming.

And that's when the contradiction hit me.

If you're afraid of boys,
if you don't trust boys,
if I'm the only exception…

Then why was there already another one?

I asked her that.

Not angrily.
Not accusingly.

Just honestly.

Why wasn't this cleared earlier?

A small dispute followed.

Not loud.
But sharp enough to hurt.

She tried to explain. I tried to understand. But fear doesn't listen to explanations when it has memory backing it up.

And again, it was Holi time.

Again.

At that point, it genuinely started feeling like this festival carried something bitter for me. Not superstition. Just association. Like every year around these dates, something slipped out of my hands.

The argument didn't last long.

She apologized. Repeatedly.

More than words, she acted.

She removed the boy immediately.

And I hate admitting this, but the moment she did, I felt relief.

Not pride.
Not victory.

Relief.

Like a tight knot inside my chest had finally loosened.

She promised me it wouldn't happen again.

That she would be careful.
That she understood why it scared me.

And I believed her.

Because at that point, believing felt easier than carrying fear into another silence.

By then, I had started noticing something quietly unsettling.

Shasi was scared.

Not of me.
But of losing me.

She would apologize even when nothing was wrong. She would overthink small pauses, small changes in tone. Sometimes she would ask questions that didn't need answers, only reassurance.

She was afraid that one small mistake would make me leave.

And maybe, after everything she had lived through, that fear made sense.

One evening, I was sitting in the lobby at home when my mumma asked me something casually, the way parents do when they don't realize they're opening a door.

"Have you made a girlfriend in college?"

I smiled and said I would tell her properly.

And I did.

I told her she wasn't from college. I told her how we met. How it started. How things returned after silence. I didn't go into the painful parts. I didn't talk about why she left or how it broke me.

I softened the story.

I just said that there had been an argument, and that later her phone and number were lost, so she had no way to contact me.

And somewhere between telling it out loud and watching my mumma listen calmly, I realized something.

This was an opportunity.

That night, when the house was quieter and it was just me and mumma, I made a decision.

I video-called Shasi.

We had planned it already. She knew it was coming. Still, when the call connected, I could see the nervousness on her face. Her smile was hesitant. Her posture stiff.

Fear doesn't disappear just because you expect it.

I turned the phone slightly so mumma could see her.

They talked for a bit.

Simple questions.
Her name.
Where she was from.
Nothing heavy.

But every word mattered.

I could see Shasi relax slowly, breath by breath, as she realized this wasn't an interrogation. This wasn't danger. This was just… normal.

After the call, I saved her number in my mumma's phone.

And then I gave Shasi my mumma's number too.

So they could stay in touch.

Not constantly.
Not dramatically.

Just enough to exist in each other's world.

It wasn't a solution.

It was a signal.

That she wasn't hidden.
That she wasn't temporary.

That she didn't have to live in fear of disappearing overnight.

For the first time since she returned, I felt like I had given her something stronger than reassurance.

I had given her visibility.

And maybe that was the first real step toward safety.

Her board exams finally ended.

For the first time in months, she sounded lighter. Less rushed. Less guarded.

She told me she was relieved.

She wouldn’t have to see Utsav again.

At least, that’s what she believed then.

Around the same time, something else shifted.

Her father, unexpectedly, agreed to let her pursue aviation. The industry she had once spoken about with hesitation, as if it were a dream she wasn’t allowed to touch.

She got admission in an aviation institute close to her house. Barely five minutes away. Close enough to feel safe. Close enough to feel watched. Close enough to feel possible.

Classes were scheduled from Monday to Friday. Around two hours every day.

It was a new routine.

A new beginning.

Her best friend Priya joined the same institute. And there, she also became close to another girl, Preeti. New friendships forming easily in a place where everyone else was older, already graduated, already living a version of adulthood she was just stepping into.

She and Priya were the youngest there.

The rest were ahead in age, experience, confidence.

I was happy for her.

Genuinely.

She was finally moving forward. Out of school. Out of boards. Out of fear, at least on the surface.

But happiness doesn’t erase memory.

The night before her first day, I said something I had been holding back.

Not angrily.
Not accusingly.

Carefully.

I asked her not to repeat what had happened when she joined a new school in Class 11th.

I didn’t explain it again. I didn’t need to. We both knew what that sentence carried.

She didn’t hesitate.

She told me it would never happen again.

Ever.

Her voice was steady. Certain.

She said she loved me.

Like she always did.

Sometimes I said it first. Sometimes she did. By then, those words had become part of our breathing. Natural. Familiar. Almost routine.

That night, I believed her.

Not because I was naïve.

But because trusting her felt better than living in anticipation of loss.

And because I wanted this new beginning to stay clean, at least for one night.

Around that time, I did something that looked casual from the outside.

I sent a follow request to Priya. *[Priya knew about me as Shasi told her already about me]*

She accepted it.
And then sent one back.

It didn't feel like crossing a line. It felt… practical.

I told myself it was harmless.

But the truth was simpler and heavier.

I had learned what silence can do.

I had learned how suddenly phones disappear. How explanations get delayed. How days stretch when you don't know what's happening on the other side.

So I created a small safety net.

If Shasi's phone was taken again, she could tell Priya.
And Priya could tell me.

That was the idea.

Not control.
Not surveillance.

Just continuity.

And I wasn't wrong.

Once or twice, it happened exactly like that. Her phone went silent, and through Priya, I still knew she was okay. That nothing bad had happened. That silence had a reason.

Those moments brought relief.

But they also revealed something about me that I didn't want to examine too closely.

I had started preparing for absence before it arrived.

I wasn't just loving anymore.

I was anticipating loss.

I've always been someone who keeps backups.
Not because I expect things to fail.
But because I've seen what happens when they do.

And somewhere along the way, that habit quietly entered my relationship too.

One day, something small slipped out of alignment.

Her classes were supposed to end after two hours.

That time passed.

She didn't reach home.

At first, I didn't panic. I waited a little. Then a little more. When I finally asked where she was, her reply came casually.

She said she was at a café.

With Priya.
With Preeti.

And with two others.

Sumeet.
Rishi.

The names landed heavier than they should have.

Not because they were boys.

But because I hadn't expected them to be there at all.

Something inside me tightened immediately. Not logic. Not accusation. Just instinct waking up before permission was granted.

I remembered how these things had started before.
New places. New people. Small changes that looked harmless at first.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions.

But fear doesn't ask whether it's welcome.

I told her how it made me feel.

This time, I wasn't calm.

My words came faster. Sharper. Anger crept in, not because I wanted control, but because I felt exposed again. Like I had stepped into the same room I had sworn I wouldn't return to.

I could hear it in my own voice.

I was scared.

She didn't shut down.

She didn't dismiss it.

She stayed.

She explained. Reassured. Tried to slow me down the way you talk to someone whose thoughts are running ahead of them.

And eventually, she managed to calm me.

Not by winning an argument.

But by staying present long enough for my fear to lose momentum.

That night, nothing broke.

But something changed.

Because that was the first time I realized how easily trust can turn into vigilance when memory keeps interrupting the present.

One day, she changed her Instagram username back to her real name.

She also changed her display picture.

It felt small. Ordinary. Like reclaiming something that belonged to her.

I asked her carefully if it was safe.

I reminded her that if Utsav found the account again, he might return. That blocking him once didn't mean he wouldn't try.

She replied without hesitation.

She said she couldn't live in fear anymore.

I admired that.

For a moment, it felt like strength.

That moment didn't last.

Within hours, it started.

Follow requests.
Messages.
Notifications she hadn't invited back into her life.

Utsav had found her.

This time, the confidence disappeared.

She cried on video call.

Not quietly. Not controlled.

She broke.

She kept saying she had made the biggest mistake of her life by ever going to him. That she should never have trusted him. That she didn't know how to escape him now.

I stayed with her.

I calmed her down. Told her to breathe. Told her she wasn't alone.

Together, we created a new Instagram account. A clean one. No name. No picture. No trace.

For a few minutes, it felt like we had contained the damage.

Then it turned toward me.

Somehow, Utsav found my account too.

Then another one.
Then another.

Follow requests from unknown profiles. Messages filled with abuse. Threats. Warnings.

He told me to leave her.

He told me if he ever found my address, he would come and beat me.

I didn't tell anyone immediately, but my body reacted before my mind could.

My heartbeat climbed.
My hands felt cold.
Fear settled in my chest and didn't ask permission.

Still, part of me wanted to confront him.

I wanted to understand what his problem was. I wanted to stop things directly instead of running from shadows.

That's who I am. I believe in hearing both sides.

But the moment I mentioned it, she stopped me.

Completely.

She told me if I talked to him, she would end her life.

Not as a threat.

As terror.

She was crying while saying it. Shaking. Falling apart in front of my eyes.

I froze.

In that moment, nothing else mattered.

Not fairness.
Not curiosity.
Not my nature.

Only one thing existed.

Her tears.

They melted every argument I had prepared.

So I didn't talk to him.

I didn't confront.
I didn't ask questions.

I chose silence.

Not because it was right.

But because I was afraid of the cost of doing anything else.

And even now, when I look back at that moment, I don't see a decision.

I see a boy choosing fear over balance, because fear had already taken the room.

And that was life then.

Not peaceful.
Not broken either.

We loved each other.

We argued sometimes.
Got jealous sometimes.
Got insecure more often than we admitted.

But we stayed.

Between calls and video calls, between reassurance and fear, between apologies and promises, we kept choosing each other.

We talked about meeting.

Only talked.

Plans without dates.
Dates without certainty.

She missed me. Said it often. Said it softly, like missing was something she had learned to live with.

I missed her too.

But reality stood between us.

Distance.
Fear.
And a shadow that didn't leave quietly.

Utsav was still there. Not always visible, but present enough to shape how careful we had to be. How many precautions we took. How much we thought before doing anything simple.

And yet, life continued.

That was the rhythm till April 2024.

Love existing alongside anxiety.
Hope sharing space with vigilance.
Happiness never alone, always accompanied by caution.

Nothing had collapsed yet.

Nothing had fully healed either.

We were standing somewhere in between.

Still together.
Still planning.

Still believing that meeting each other might finally make things lighter.

Chapter 11: 25 May

Description: *A day planned carefully, lived briefly, and remembered deeply. This chapter captures a first meeting shaped by patience, borrowed time, and moments that felt unreal while they were happening. What began as distance finally became presence.*

It was a random day of April 2024.

There was no announcement, no sudden shift in tone. Just a change in the way she spoke to me. The pauses between her messages felt heavier. Her words stayed longer on my screen, as if she didn't want to leave the conversation even when it had already ended.

She told me she missed me.
Not playfully.
Not casually.

She missed me in a way that felt real.

For the first time since that party night, since the day I had seen her properly, the distance between us stopped feeling abstract. It started feeling measurable. Cities. Hours. Money. Permissions. All the things that turn wanting into a problem.

We talked about meeting.

At first, it sounded simple. I would come to her city. Delhi to Ayodhya. Faizabad. A straight line on a map, but not in life. I was still a student. Tickets cost more than I could spend without thinking. And even if I managed that, there was another wall waiting. My parents.

It hadn't been long since I had left home and started living independently. Freedom was still new. Borrowed, in a way. If they found out I was travelling alone to meet someone, especially for reasons I couldn't explain properly, it wouldn't end well. I knew that. I didn't need to test it.

So I stopped forcing the idea.

Instead of asking how to go, I asked how not to get caught between wanting and reality.

That's when another thought surfaced.

My school friends had been asking me to plan something for a while. Anant and Adit. I had known them since childhood. Class 2, maybe even before that. They weren't just friends I met later in life. They belonged to a time when things were simpler, when plans didn't need reasons beyond fun.

They wanted a trip.
Somewhere together.
Somewhere we could remember later.

I listened. And slowly, a shape began to form around the idea.

Ayodhya.

A holy place. A reason no one would question. Temples. Darshan. A trip that looked clean from the outside. A plan that didn't demand lies, only framing.

I didn't tell them everything. I didn't need to. All I needed was the direction.

When I felt ready, I asked my father.

Not dramatically. Not with buildup. Just the way you ask someone when you already know the answer, but still respect the process.

I asked him if, in late May, I could take the car and go with my friends to Ayodhya to visit the temples.

He didn't hesitate.

He agreed.
Told me to finalize the date.
Told me to inform him once everything was decided.

That was it.

No suspicion.
No warnings.
No conditions.

I walked away from that conversation with something I hadn't expected.

Permission.

And for the first time, meeting her didn't feel impossible anymore.

When my second semester exams ended in mid-May 2024, I went back home.

For the first time in months, there was no pressure waiting for me. No deadlines. No alarms. No late-night revisions pretending to be enough. I was relaxed in a way that felt unfamiliar. Days passed slowly. Meals tasted normal again. Sleep came without negotiation.

Somewhere in that calm, the date settled.

25 May 2024.

It wasn't chosen dramatically. It just fit. Far enough from exams. Close enough to not lose momentum. A day that felt possible.

I told Anant and Adit. They were in immediately. No questions, no hesitation. Just excitement, the kind friends bring when they're more interested in the journey than the reason behind it.

I told my father too.
He didn't ask much. He just nodded and made arrangements.

He assigned a driver. His most trusted one at that time. Someone who had been driving for our family long enough to know routes, silences, and responsibility. That detail mattered to him. And somehow, it mattered to me too.

Everything started falling into place.

Around April or early May itself, I had already spoken to Priya. About where we could meet. How it should look from the outside. What would feel safe. What wouldn't raise unnecessary questions. Those conversations were careful, measured. No excitement leaking into recklessness.

But there was still one wall left.

Her home.

Shasi's parents were strict. That wasn't new. Especially her mother. Going out wasn't simple for her. It wasn't about distance. It was about permission, trust, and the constant fear of being misunderstood.

She couldn't just say she was going to meet me. That wasn't an option.

But there was one small opening.

Priya.

If Priya went with her, things changed. Her mother trusted Priya. If it looked like a girls' outing, something harmless, something normal, then maybe… just maybe… permission could exist.

Shasi spoke to her mother.

Not once.
Not forcefully.
Carefully.

Her mother didn't say yes immediately. She said she would think.

Those words stretched longer than they should have.

Every time Shasi told me about it, her voice carried uncertainty. Not fear exactly. More like waiting on a verdict she couldn't influence.

Then, one day, the answer came.

Her mother agreed.

Just like that.

No celebration.
No relief loud enough to spill out.

But now, it was real.

She could come.

The date was fixed.
The car was arranged.
The driver was ready.
My friends were in.

Her side was cleared.

Everything was set.

And all that remained was the day before.

24 May 2024.

That's when things actually began.

The days before the trip didn't feel rushed.
They felt intentional.

For two or three days before 25 May, Adit and I kept going to the market. Not urgently. Not desperately. Just walking, looking, pretending we knew what we were searching for.

I wanted to gift her something.
But neither of us knew what was right.

What do you give someone you're meeting for the first time after years of knowing them through a screen? Something too big would feel heavy. Something too small would feel careless. Every option felt like the wrong one the moment we imagined handing it to her.

That's when I remembered something I usually forgot.

I had a jewellery showroom.

So I stopped overthinking.

I gave Adit some money and told him exactly what to do. I said I would sit inside the showroom beside my younger uncle, acting normal. He would come in like a customer and ask about a silver pen.

Not jewellery.
A pen.

The kind with a silver body. Something that looks ordinary until you hold it properly. A pen whose refill could be changed, something meant to be used, not just kept.

Adit did exactly that.

My uncle asked him who it was for.
Adit replied casually, "My younger sister."

My uncle showed him a few options. From where I was sitting, I didn't say a word. I just watched. And when the right one appeared, I signaled quietly. A small movement of my hand. That was enough.

As planned, he took the pen and went to a shop near the showroom. Got it gift-packed neatly, without questions, without drawing attention.

That was it.

Her gift was set.

I also knew something else about her.

She loved roses.

Not dramatically. Just genuinely. The kind of liking that comes up naturally in conversation. I wanted to get one for her too. But that evening, I couldn't find one. Not a real rose. Not even an artificial one that didn't look cheap.

I told her about it honestly.
She said it was fine.

But I knew she was curious about the gift. She asked about it more than once. I smiled through text and didn't reveal anything. Some things deserve silence before they arrive.

That night, another detail shifted the plan.

My father asked me how many people were going.

I told him three.
Me, Anant, and Adit.

He paused for a second and then said I should take my younger brother with me too.

I didn't argue.
I didn't hesitate.

I said okay.

During the Holi holidays, I had already told my brother about Shasi. He knew who she was. He knew why Ayodhya mattered to me more than just temples. When I told him he was coming along, he got excited in his own quiet way.

Ayodhya felt bigger now. Fuller.

That night, something else happened.

My mother already knew, from much earlier, that we were planning to meet. She hadn't asked too many questions. She had just observed, the way she always does.

She called me to her room and handed me something.

Two earrings.

Simple. Elegant. Not heavy. A gift from her to Shasi.

I didn’t say much. I didn’t need to. That moment stayed with me longer than words could have.

By the time night settled in, everything was ready.

The driver.
The car.
The gifts.
The plan.

We were talking quietly, the way people do when a big day is waiting but neither wants to say it out loud yet. Somewhere between small sentences and pauses, the conversation drifted into something more personal.

I told her something I hadn’t said before.

That I had never kissed anyone.
That it would be my first time.

There was no embarrassment in saying it. Just honesty.

She replied after a short pause and told me she hadn’t kissed anyone either.

That shared simplicity stayed between us for a moment. Not excitement. Not tension. Just two people standing at the same starting line.

I smiled at my screen and told her something half-joking, half-serious. That when we met, I was going to kiss her a lot. That every time she stayed with me, I would keep kissing her, as long as we were together.

She didn’t stop me.
She didn’t tease me away from it.

She just stayed.

After that, nothing more needed to be said.

Shasi and I texted one last time before sleeping. Nothing dramatic. Just a quiet good night, stretched a little longer than usual.

Tomorrow wasn’t just a date anymore.

It was a meeting.

And for the first time since that party night, I was going to see her again.

It was still early when my alarm rang.

Today.

Not someday.
Not “soon.”

Today.

I grabbed my phone and started calling everyone one by one.

Adit.
Anant.

Half-asleep voices turned into alert ones the moment they remembered the plan. Within an hour, everyone was at my house. Faces sleepy but excited.

Me.
My younger brother.
Adit.
Anant.
And the driver.

We left just after sunrise.

The roads were quieter than usual. Morning air still cool, like the day hadn't decided to become hot yet.

While we were on the way, I texted Shasi.

"Getting ready?"

Her reply didn't come immediately.

When it did, my chest tightened.

"There's a problem."

Priya had fever. Weakness. Her parents were about to leave home in a few hours. She couldn't come along. And without Priya, Shasi couldn't step out of her house.

Which meant… everything could collapse right there.

I stared at the screen longer than I should have.

All the planning.
All the waiting.
All the days counting toward this.

For a moment, it felt like the same old story repeating itself. Something always going wrong just before meeting.

But she didn't give up.

She tried again.

She convinced Priya somehow. After a lot of talking, Priya agreed to at least come with her, drop her at the meeting point, and leave immediately.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it was enough.

I finally breathed properly.

She even told me she had prepared sandwiches for us.

That small detail stayed with me more than anything else.

In the middle of all this chaos, she had still thought about us eating.

Meanwhile, inside the car, I leaned toward the driver quietly.

I told him not to mention anything at home. Not my intentions. Not the real reason for the trip.

He looked at me through the mirror and smiled.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Just enjoy.”

Simple words. But they felt like permission.

We reached Ayodhya.

Crowded. Loud. Alive.

Pilgrims everywhere. Temples ringing with bells. Vendors shouting. Heat already rising even though the day had barely begun.

For a few minutes, I told my brother and the driver to stay near the parking area.

We waited.

I kept checking my phone.

Every notification felt louder than usual.

“She’s here,” she texted.

But we couldn’t see each other.

Too many people. Too much movement.

So I sent her a photo of the nearest big structure.

“Near this.”

A few seconds later, I saw her.

And everything else blurred.

She wasn't a screen anymore.
Not pixels.
Not a voice through calls.

She was walking toward me.

Real.

Before thinking, I stepped forward and hugged her quickly. Just a small, normal hug like people give when they meet someone after a long time.

But to me, it felt unreal.

Then, without overthinking, I kissed her forehead. *[Adit recorded this moment from my phone]*

Soft. Natural. Almost instinctive.

Like that's where the moment belonged.

We arranged an auto for Priya so she could go back home safely. I bought chocolates for both of them and handed them over.

Priya smiled, teased us a little, and left.

And then…

Shasi was standing there.

Just her.

Finally.

My friends quietly moved a little away, pretending to be busy, giving us space without saying it out loud.

For a few seconds, we just stood there.

Looking.

Confirming.

Like our brains needed proof.

Without warning, I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

She jumped a little.

"Haww!"

I laughed and said, "I told you na… I'm going to kiss you a lot."

Even now, I don't know where that confidence came from.

I used to be the shy, introverted one. The one who avoided eye contact.

But that day, something else took over.

Maybe love removes hesitation.

Maybe waiting too long removes fear.

We looked into each other's eyes and said the same thing almost together.

"I can't believe you're actually here."

It felt like a dream you're scared to blink inside.

But it was real.

After a while, Adit took Anant toward the ghat for a bath.

So it was just us.

We sat under a tree, away from the crowd.

Summer heat everywhere. She wasn't eating or drinking much. Said she didn't feel like it in the heat. Still, we shared some sugarcane juice together.

Nothing fancy.

Just two glasses.

But it felt like the best drink of my life.

We sat close.

Hands slowly finding each other.

Fingers interlocking naturally, like they had done this before.

We clicked a photo together.

Both of us wearing red tops and jeans.

Planned twinning.

And while sitting there, under that tree, holding her hand, listening to the noise of Ayodhya in the distance…

I realized something simple.

All those months of calls, fear, waiting, planning…

had finally turned into this one moment.

And for once,

nothing was missing.

After a while, Adit and Anant came back from the ghat, hair wet, laughing about something stupid like nothing important existed in the world.

My brother joined us too and finally met Shasi properly.

For a second, I felt awkward introducing two different worlds of my life to each other.

My childhood.
My family.
And her.

But it blended easier than I expected.

We all started joking, teasing, talking nonsense. Walking around like a normal group of friends. No tension. No formality. Shasi laughed freely, and watching her laugh with them felt strange and comforting at the same time.

Like she belonged there.

Like she fit.

After some time, we decided to visit the main temple. Ram Mandir.

We reached the lockers, kept our bags and phones inside, locked everything carefully. But due to some issue inside, the entry was paused. Something about crowd and connection.

We waited.

Nothing moved.

Eventually, they told us it wouldn't be possible right then.

Disappointed, we came back to the lockers and just sat there for a while, resting.

It wasn't what we planned.

But maybe it was what we needed.

Because for a few minutes, it was just us again.

A small corner.
Less noise.
Less crowd.

I was telling her something random, not even looking at her. I don't even remember what I was saying.

Mid-sentence, she suddenly pulled my face toward her.

Before I could react—

She kissed me.

On my lips.

Everything stopped.

It was my first lip kiss.

And even now, I can't explain that feeling.

Not fireworks.
Not drama.

Just… warmth.

Like the world shrinking to one point.

Like time holding its breath.

When we moved apart, we just stared at each other and smiled like idiots.

Then we kissed again.

Soft. Short. Shy.

I kissed her cheeks after that, half-laughing, half-embarrassed at how unreal everything felt.

For someone who used to be so introverted, so scared of even small things, I don't know where that courage came from.

Maybe love teaches you faster than life does.

After that, we tried visiting other temples for blessings.

But every place was either closed or too crowded. Lines too long. Time running faster than we wanted. And she had to go back before sunset. She didn't feel safe staying out late.

So instead of forcing anything, we just roamed.

Walked around.

Talked.

Sat inside the car for a while with the AC on, cooling ourselves down from the heat.

That's when we finally ate the sandwiches she had packed.

Everyone had one.

And genuinely… they were amazing.

Simple. Homemade. But better than anything we could've bought outside.

My friends teased her, she just smiled shyly.

I kept watching her quietly.

Thinking how someone could feel so close in such ordinary moments.

Eventually, it was time.

We decided to drop her somewhere safe, from where she could get a direct auto home without switching rides.

Inside the car, my friends understood without saying anything.

They looked outside. Talked among themselves. Pretended not to notice us.

Giving us privacy.

Again.

We sat close.

Closer than before.

We didn't count anything anymore.

Kisses on cheeks.
Nose.
Lips.

Small, soft, stolen seconds.

Not rushed. Not desperate.

Just two people trying to memorize each other.

She got quiet.

Her eyes looked heavy.

Not crying. But close.

Like tears were waiting but choosing not to fall.

"Please don't go," she said softly.
"Don't leave me. Stay a little more."

That sentence broke something inside me.

But I smiled and held her hand.

“It’s okay. I love you,” I told her.

That day, we said it face to face.

Not through calls.
Not through screens.

“I love you.”

Hearing it like that felt different.

Real.

Like the words had weight now.

When we were moving towards our car, I removed my silver tortoise ring. The one with the blue stone. The one my grandma had given me long ago.

It wasn’t just a ring.

It was memory.

Home.

Something that belonged to me.

I held her hand and tried giving it to her.

She refused at first.

But I forced it gently.

Because I wanted her to have something that was mine. Something real. Something that stayed even when I wasn’t there.

She finally accepted it.

I made sure she sat properly in the auto. Watched until it disappeared into the road.

Inside the car, while heading home, I opened my gallery.

Photos.

So many photos.

Few videos.

Us smiling.
Holding hands.

Sitting under the tree.
Laughing.

And one photo Adit had secretly clicked when we were hugging at a quiet spot with no crowd.

That one became my favorite instantly.

Not perfect.

Not posed.

Just real.

Two people holding each other like the world might disappear tomorrow.

I kept staring at it the entire way back.

Smiling to myself like an idiot.

Because for the first time since that party night…

I didn’t just remember her.

I had met her.

And this time, it wasn’t through a screen.

It was real.

And that memory stayed with me long after the road ended.

Chapter 12: The Weight of Staying

Description: *Love deepens through care, intimacy, and forgiveness, but staying begins to cost more than leaving ever did. As trust and insecurity coexist, this chapter captures the quiet moment when holding on starts reshaping who you are.*

When I reached home, we video-called again.
Not because we had something to say —
but because neither of us trusted memory yet.

We smiled at each other like people checking proof.
Like if we stayed long enough on the screen, the day wouldn't undo itself.

Later, I showed the photos to my mother.
The normal ones.
The smiling ones.
The kind that fit inside a family's understanding.

There were other photos too.
Moments that felt too alive to explain.
I didn't hide them out of fear.
I kept them to myself because some truths lose meaning when witnessed too early.

That night, distance returned quietly.
Same cities. Same screens. Same rules.
Only now, distance had a face.

Her eyes stayed with me.
The way her hair fell without effort.
Her voice, closer than it had ever been.
Expressions I could now remember without guessing.

She felt complete to me.
And I didn't realize it then, but that completeness was already planting something else inside me.

Trust.

And right beside it — fear.

Loving her felt easy after that day.
Trusting her felt natural.

What I didn't notice yet
was how quietly insecurity had started living in the same place.

A few days later, in early June, something reached me that didn't belong to my life anymore — but entered it anyway.

A follow request.

The username wasn't random.
It was deliberate.

shasi_cheater.

I didn't open it immediately. I didn't need to.
The meaning arrived before the details did.

When I finally looked, the display picture stopped me completely.
It was her. And him. Too close to misunderstand.

There were photos.
A reel.
Moments from a past I already knew existed — but had never been forced to see like this.

I didn't feel angry.
I didn't feel jealous.

I felt quiet.

Because knowing someone has a past is one thing.
Watching it walk back into your present without consent is another.

I asked Shasi to check my Instagram requests. She had access to my account then. She rarely used her own because of him. She saw it — and without discussion, she blocked him.

That should have been the end of it.

It wasn't.

When Shasi had returned to my life, I hadn't protected my past.
I hadn't staggered it.
I hadn't waited for the "right moment."

I told her everything.
At once.

What I had felt.
Who I had been with.
What had happened before her.

Not because I was proud of it —

but because I didn't want anything standing between us that wasn't real.

I remember asking her then, clearly, if there was anything I should know about her past.
Especially about Utsav.

She said no.

I asked again later.
Carefully.

She still said no.

So when that Instagram account appeared in early June, it didn't just show me her past.
It showed me a gap.

A space between what had happened
and what had been shared.

After she blocked him, I asked again.
This time, I didn't soften the question.
I asked her to be honest — not kind, not protective — just honest.

I asked whether they had kissed.

She said only on the cheeks.
Nothing more.

When I asked about lips, there was a pause.
Long enough for me to notice.

She said no.
She explained there was never enough privacy. That it never went beyond that.

I listened.
I nodded.
And I told myself to believe her.

But something inside me didn't settle the way it used to.
Not because of what she said —
but because of how carefully it was said.

Until then, I had believed honesty arrived immediately, without shaping.
This felt different.

Not wrong.
Just… edited.

That night, nothing broke.
We did fought.
But we didn't stop talking.

But somewhere, quietly, a thin line appeared.

Like a crack in glass you only notice when the light hits it just right.

Everything still looked the same.

It just wasn't as strong anymore.

Because trust doesn't break when people have a past.

It cracks when the past is revealed selectively.

And that night, even though everything between us continued the same way,
the glass was no longer untouched.

A few days after that fight, things slowly returned to normal.

At least on the surface.

We talked again. Laughed again. Said "I love you" like nothing had shifted.

One night, she told me softly not to bring up her past anymore.

"Let it stay there," she said.

The sentence was simple.
But it stayed with me longer than it should have.

It felt like a door closing.

Like there was something behind it I wasn't allowed to see.

I noticed it.
I questioned it.
And then, like always, I ignored it.

Because loving someone sometimes means choosing peace over doubt.

Around the same time, something else began changing between us.

Distance does strange things to people.

When you can't touch, you compensate.

When you can't sit beside each other, you try to feel close in other ways.

Late-night calls grew longer.
Silences grew comfortable.
Boundaries we once had stopped feeling necessary.

We started sharing parts of ourselves we had never shown anyone before.

At first it was harmless.
Sharing random selfies.
Then more personal ones.
Then moments we would never have shared with anyone else.

Every step felt small while taking it.

But each step crossed something.

Not just thoughts.

Ourselves.

At first it felt awkward. Then funny. Then normal.

Too normal.

The kind of comfort that only comes when you trust someone completely.

Or think you do.

Sometimes we would stay on video calls for hours, doing nothing, just existing together. Sometimes those moments drifted into territory we were too young to fully understand but too curious to avoid.

We crossed lines slowly. Quietly. Without announcement.

Every time telling ourselves: it's okay… we love each other.

It stopped feeling like a choice.

It became routine.

A private world only we knew.

Sometimes she would ask me to stay on video calls while she changed.
Sometimes we'd laugh about how awkward we used to be.

Comfort replaced hesitation.

Shyness disappeared.

A world that existed only between the two of us.

Things we would have judged months ago became routine.

Looking back, I don't remember the exact days those changes happened.

Only that one day we were innocent,

and a few weeks later we weren't.

Moments like that stopped feeling strange faster than they should have.

Looking back now, I realize something I didn't understand then:

It wasn't just intimacy.

It was exposure.

The more we shared, the more pieces of ourselves we handed to each other.

Photos. Videos. Video calls. Moments. Vulnerabilities.

Trust, in its rawest form.

And trust, once given like that, doesn't come back easily.

At that time, I thought it meant closeness.

I didn't know it also meant risk.

Somewhere between all of that, our relationship stopped being just romance.

It became routine.

A life.

We weren't only sharing late-night calls or private moments.

We were sharing everything.

She trusted me with her fears, her home problems, her studies.
I trusted her with my time, my days, my attention.

While we were crossing emotional and physical boundaries in private, there was another side of us that looked almost innocent.

I helped her with everything.

Assignments.
Homework.
Assessments.

If she didn't understand something, I searched for hours. Scraped the internet. Read articles. Watched lectures. Used every tool I could find just to simplify things for her.

Sometimes I'd solve half her work before she even asked.

It never felt like effort.

It felt like responsibility.

Like taking care of someone you love.

That's what we were doing.

Caring for each other in small ways.

Checking if the other had eaten.
Reminding each other to sleep.
Staying on call while studying.

Love, in its softest form.

But at the same time, something else was quietly growing beside it.

Possession.

After getting back together with her, I changed things about myself without her even asking.

Earlier, I used to be like any normal teenage boy.
You notice people. You look around. You get distracted.

But after her, I trained myself not to.

If someone attractive walked past, I looked away.

Not dramatically.

Just instinctively.

Like my eyes didn't have the right anymore.

It wasn't forced.

It felt natural.

Because in my head, there was only one girl who mattered.

And that was enough.

She had my Instagram account too.

At first it was just convenience.

Then it became questions.

"Who is she?"
"Who's this girl?"
"Why does she follow you?"

Sometimes they were classmates.
Sometimes cousins.
Sometimes relatives.

Names that meant nothing.

Still, she checked each one carefully.

Slowly, one by one,few girls started disappearing from my followers.

Removed.

Unfollowed.

Deleted.

I noticed.

But I didn't stop her.

Because every time I told myself the same thing:

I don't need anyone else anyway.

She's enough.

At that time, it didn't feel like control.

It felt like commitment.

It felt like loyalty.

It felt like proof of love.

Looking back now, I realize something strange.

We were doing two completely opposite things at the same time.

On one side, we were caring for each other like partners.

Helping. Supporting. Protecting.

On the other side, we were slowly shrinking our worlds until only we existed in them.

Less friends.
Less space.
Less air.

More "us."

More dependence.

More exposure.

More things that would hurt badly if they ever broke.

At that time, it felt romantic.

Now I understand it was something else too.

When two people become each other's entire world,
love doesn't just grow.

So does fear.

Some nights, she would tell me about her day.

Normal things.
Classes.
Teachers.
Little incidents that didn't matter on their own.

But then names would appear.

Rishi.
Sumeet.

Casually.
In passing.
The way names do when they're part of a place you weren't in.

She would mention jokes.
Small laughs.
Moments from the aviation institute that sounded ordinary to anyone else.

But not to me.

Something inside me would tighten before I could stop it.

I didn't interrupt her.
I didn't accuse her immediately.

I listened.

And with every sentence, something sour settled quietly in my chest.

I started hating names I had never met.
Faces I had never seen.
People who had done nothing to me.

I didn't understand why.

I only knew that hearing about them made me feel replaceable.

So we fought again.

Not explosively.
Not dramatically.

But with the kind of tension that comes when the same wound keeps getting touched.

I asked her the question that had been circling my mind for days.

If you say you're afraid of boys,
if you say you don't trust them,
then why are they there at all?

Why the joking.
Why the conversations.
Why the café.

The moment I said it, everything changed.

She didn't argue.

She broke.

She cried in a way that wasn't defensive or angry.
She cried like someone who had been holding something too long.

She told me she had no one.

Not the way people say it casually —
but the way people say it when they mean it.

She said her family didn't understand her.
That her parents were distant.

That she didn't feel liked anywhere.

No sisters.
No space.
No place where she felt chosen.

She told me there were only two people she truly loved.

Her younger brother, Prashant.

And me.

She said I was the only one she could call *hers*.

She kept repeating it through tears.

"You are the only one."
"Please don't do this."
"I love you."
"Please don't leave."

Her voice wasn't manipulative.
It was desperate.

And desperation is hard to stand against.

I felt my anger dissolve before it could finish forming.

Because how do you argue with someone who is crying like that?
How do you stay firm when someone is begging you to stay?

She promised again.

That she would stop interacting.
That she would be careful.
That she would not give me reasons to doubt.

I didn't demand it.

She offered it herself.

And just like that, I softened.

I forgave her.

Not because the doubt disappeared —
but because love, at that point, felt heavier than fear.

I told myself I was being understanding.
Mature.
Supportive.

But looking back now, I see what I couldn't then.

Every fight ended the same way.

With me letting go.
With her holding on.

And each time I forgave,
I stepped a little further away from my own discomfort
and a little deeper into hers.

What hurt me wasn't just jealousy.

It was imbalance.

She removed girls from my life — girls I didn't even talk to.
Classmates.
Relatives.
Names that meant nothing.

And I let it happen.

Because in my head, she was the only girl that mattered anyway.

At the same time, she was laughing, joking, moving freely among boys in her institute.

Rishi.
Sumeet.
Names that kept returning.

That contrast stayed with me.

From the beginning, I knew her nature.
She was an extrovert.
She liked people.
She liked attention.

And I don't say that as an insult — I say it as an observation I had accepted early.

But knowing someone's nature doesn't stop fear from growing.

Because I'm a boy.

And I know boys.

I've grown up among them.
I've listened to conversations I wish I could forget.
I've seen how easily attraction turns into imagination.

In my friend circles, I've seen how casually girls are spoken about — not as people, but as experiences.
How "college life" becomes an excuse.
How attention is mistaken for invitation.
How physical closeness is treated like a goal, not a boundary.

Sometimes, all it takes is a reply.
A smile.
An accidental eye contact.

And suddenly, a boy starts building dreams that were never offered.

In India, this doesn't feel abstract.
It feels close.
Familiar.
Too common.

We hear stories.
We read news.
We see how quickly comfort is misunderstood, and how badly that misunderstanding can end.

All of that lived in my head.

So when she talked about joking around, about cafés, about casual interactions, my fear didn't come from nowhere.

It came from knowing how easily boys confuse attention for permission.

And the contradiction tore at me.

If you say you're afraid of boys,
if you say you don't trust them,
then why let them stay close at all?

That question haunted me.

And every time I raised it, we fought.

Not because I wanted control —
but because I wanted safety.

For her.

For us.

For something I was terrified of losing.

She would cry and tell me she had no one.
That her family didn't understand her.
That she didn't feel chosen anywhere.

She would say I was the only one.
That I was *hers*.
That she loved me and her younger brother, Prashant — and no one else like that.

And every time she said it, I folded.

Because when someone tells you they are alone in the world,
you stop arguing.

You stop insisting.

You start protecting.

So I forgave her again.

Not because the contradiction disappeared —
but because fear and love had started living in the same place inside me.

I thought I was being careful.

I didn't realize I was becoming possessive.

And I didn't realize that my possessiveness wasn't born from dominance —

It was born from knowing exactly how unsafe the world can be.

There was one more thing I didn't tell myself at first.

It happened the same day we met — 25 May — after she reached home.

Her mother noticed something small.
The way happiness sometimes leaves traces before words do.

She took Shasi's hand in hers.

She placed it on her own head.

And she asked her to promise.

To tell the truth.

With whom were you today?
Was there anyone else with you?

Shasi didn't hesitate.

She said she was with Priya.

That was all.

When I heard this later, it didn't explode inside me the way other things had.

It settled.

Quietly.

Because it wasn't about hiding me.

It was about lying when truth was demanded —
not casually, not conveniently, but with a promise placed on her mother's head.

And for the first time, a question formed in my mind that scared me more than jealousy ever had.

If someone can lie to their own family,
when truth is asked directly,
when trust is invoked so clearly —

then what does loyalty actually mean?

I didn't confront her about it.

I didn't argue.

I didn't accuse.

I just added it to everything else I already knew.

The selective honesty.
The pauses.

The edited truths.
The promises made only when cornered.

Nothing broke that day.

We were still together.
Still talking.
Still saying we loved each other.

But by the end of it, I understood something I hadn't before.

Trust doesn't disappear all at once.

It erodes.

Quietly.
Layer by layer.

And by the time you notice what's missing,
you're already standing on something fragile.

That's where this chapter ends.

Because what came next
wasn't confusion anymore —

it was proof.

Chapter 13: The Things I Couldn't Unsee

Description: *Distance, memories, and half-truths begin to weigh heavier than promises. As love tries to stay gentle, trust starts cracking in quiet places. This chapter follows a season where reassurance isn't enough, and seeing too much changes everything.*

We were spending a lot of time together online by then.
Video calls that stretched longer than planned.
Calls that didn't need reasons.
Texting that filled the small gaps between everything else.

And there was one game we played obsessively. Coin Master.
It sounds small when written like that, but it wasn't. It became our shared habit. A place where we met without effort. Stealing coins, building villages, laughing at unlucky spins. Sometimes we played silently, just staying on call, hearing each other breathe while the game ran in the background.

But the moments that stayed with me weren't the playful ones.

Every month, there were days when she wasn't okay.

Her periods were never easy.
The first days were always the worst. Severe pain. Cramps that made her curl inward. A face that tried to stay normal but couldn't hide what her body was doing to her.

I could see it on video call.
The way her brows tightened.
The way her voice softened.
The way she held herself, trying not to complain.

And there was nothing I could do except stay.

So I stayed.

I talked to her gently. Slower than usual. I chose my words carefully, like they could physically reach her if I said them right. I told her to breathe with me. I reminded her that she wasn't alone. I pampered her with small sentences, soft reassurances, stupid affection that didn't try to fix anything, only to hold it.

And I watched.

I watched her face change.

Not suddenly. Not dramatically.
Just a slight loosening.
A small sigh.
A quiet relief that showed up only when pain stopped being lonely.

That was the part that broke me every time.

Because I couldn't take the pain away.
I couldn't touch her.
I couldn't do anything real.

But when my words reached her, when I saw even a little comfort settle into her expression, it felt like something mattered.

There were moments when I wished — genuinely — that I could share that pain with her. Not metaphorically. Literally. I wished I could take half of it, even a part, if that meant she wouldn't have to carry it all alone.

I couldn't stand seeing her hurt.

And maybe that's when I crossed a line without realizing it.

Because that wasn't just care anymore.
That was attachment learning how to call itself protection.

I wasn't just loving her.
I was beginning to feel responsible for her suffering.

And at the time, that felt noble.
It felt right.

I didn't know yet that love which tries to absorb pain
eventually forgets how to protect itself.

By then, our closeness had crossed into something private.

We kissed on video calls.
Not playfully.
Not jokingly.

Slow, lingering moments where distance pretended it didn't exist. Where screens became stand-ins for touch. It felt intimate, real, almost domestic in a strange way. Like we were rehearsing a life that hadn't arrived yet.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, a thought visited me quietly.

I wasn't spending time with my family.

Summer break had come. Days that were supposed to belong to home, to shared meals, casual conversations, small routines I would later miss. I noticed it once — how my phone stayed in my hand longer than it should have, how rooms filled with people felt distant because my attention was somewhere else.

I noticed it.
And then I ignored it.

Because I was already inclined toward Shasi.
Pulled.
Settled into her orbit.

Around this time, Utsav never fully disappeared.

He didn't miss opportunities. Follow requests kept coming — to me, to her — from new accounts, accounts that existed only to remind us that he was still there.

And every time it happened, Shasi reacted the same way.

Terror.

Not discomfort. Not irritation.
Fear.

Her hands would shake. Her breathing would change. Her voice would drop. I could see it even through a screen — that familiar panic settling into her body before her mind could slow it down.

That fear did something to both of us.

In those moments, we didn't talk about time or age or logic.

We talked about permanence.

Somewhere in that fear, we decided we would marry each other. Not as a plan. As a declaration. As a shield. As if naming the future loudly enough could keep him out of it.

And honestly — I think we had already decided it before. Even before 25 May. We just hadn't said it with this urgency.

Shasi was convinced of one thing:
Utsav could become an obstacle to our marriage at any time.

I told her he wouldn't.

I told her I knew the truth.
That I believed her.
That whatever had happened before didn't change how I saw her.
That it was fine.

I meant it.

But fear doesn't listen to reassurance for long.

One day, while we were talking about all this — marriage, fear, the future — her mood shifted. Something in her tightened.

And then, suddenly, she asked me something that stopped me cold.

"Can you leave your parents for me?"

The question didn’t come softly.
It came sharp. Almost angry.

I was shocked. Not offended — just stunned. I didn’t understand where it was coming from.

I told her the truth immediately.

That my family had done everything for me.
That they loved me.
That I loved them.
That I couldn’t abandon them.
That I wouldn’t.

Her expression changed.

Not anger.
Not relief.

Something unreadable.

For a moment, I didn’t know where I stood.

After that day, she never asked me that question again.

She went back to saying familiar things.
That she would help my mumma.
That she would play with my father.
That she would make my home joyful.
That my mumma was beautiful.
That she would take care of her after marriage.

Everything sounded normal again.

Too normal.

As if the question had never been asked.

But for me, it stayed.

Because love that asks you to choose between futures
often reveals its fear before its intention.

In April, Utsav found out about me properly.
Not as a shadow.
Not as a rumor.

As someone who was talking to her.

And like always, he didn’t come directly. He went sideways.

Somehow, he messaged my younger brother.

He called Shasi a cheater.
He threw words meant to create panic, not truth.
Words designed to travel fast inside a family.

I didn't panic. Not outwardly.

I told my brother to switch his account from public to private. I told him to ignore everything. To not reply. To not engage. To not let poison turn into conversation.

By then, during Holi itself, I had already told my brother about Shasi. So he understood. He didn't question me. He didn't judge. He just stood quietly where I needed him.

But Shasi was terrified.

Because for her, this wasn't just about messages.
It was about consequences.

She was scared that if Utsav sent anything to my family — even lies — everything would collapse. That my parents would see her through his words before ever knowing her through mine.

I reassured her again.
I told her we would handle it.
I told her nothing would happen.

But reassurance doesn't erase fear when someone has already lived through control.

April still had softness left in it.

During that time, we shared a song.

'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran.

We didn't just listen to it.
We lived inside it.

Sometimes she sang it quietly. Sometimes I did. Sometimes we sang it together. Sometimes we played it and stayed silent on call, letting the lyrics do what words couldn't. It felt like relief. Like a pause button. Like a reminder that love could still feel clean, slow, safe.

In April, that song worked.

It soothed us.
It calmed her shaking.
It made the future feel possible again.

But now it was June.

And something had changed.

I played the same song again.
Same voice.
Same lyrics.

And it didn't reach me anymore.

The comfort was gone.

Not because the song had changed —
but because something inside me had.

What once felt like promise now felt like memory.
What once calmed me now reminded me of what was slipping.

For the first time, music failed.

And that's when I understood something quietly frightening.

When even the things that once healed you stop working,
it's not sadness anymore.

It's a warning.

And June had just begun.

One day, she sent me a photo.

Shasi.
Priya.
Preeti.

All three standing together in their aviation uniforms. Clean. Ordinary. Smiling. Just a normal picture. I didn't question it. I didn't overthink it. It felt harmless. The kind of photo people send without intention.

A few days later, she told me her phone memory was almost full.

She was scared.

Not of losing space — but of losing something important by mistake. Photos. Videos. Memories she didn't want to touch carelessly.

So I told her to share her screen.

She trusted me enough to do it.

I guided her calmly.
Delete this. Keep that. Skip this folder. Be careful here.

And then I saw it.

One photo — the same three girls.
Another photo — the same three girls again.

But this time, they weren't alone.

Three boys were standing with them.

And I didn't need time to recognize them.

Sumeet.
Rishi.
And one more.

The names that had already lived in my head.
The names I had tried to ignore.
The names that carried fear, not jealousy.

The moment I saw that photo, something inside me collapsed.

Not slowly.
Not thoughtfully.

Instantly.

I was thrown back in time.

Diyansh.
Utsav.
Shasi.

Different faces.
Same frame.

Same pattern.

And my body reacted before my mind could process it.

It felt like a sudden strike to the chest.
Like something sharp passing straight through my heart.
Not pain that builds — pain that *arrives*.

This time, I wasn't quiet.

This time, I wasn't patient.

I was angry.

I shouted.

I scolded her.
Words came out harsh, unfiltered, sharp enough to cut both of us.

Because this wasn't about a photo.

This was about trust.

And I could see it breaking.

She cried.
She apologized.
She kept saying sorry, over and over, the way people do when they don't know how to explain themselves anymore.

I stopped talking to her.

Not to punish her.

But because I wasn't stable.

I knew myself well enough to know that if I kept talking in that state, I would say something irreversible. Something cruel. Something that couldn't be taken back.

So I pulled away.

I replied late.
Deliberately.

Minutes stretched into hours. Messages stayed unread longer than they should have. Not because I didn't care — but because I cared too much to let anger decide my words.

And in that silence, I felt it clearly.

Not doubt.
Not suspicion.

Breakage.

That day, I didn't *feel* my trust weakening.

I **saw** it shatter.

Cleanly. Audibly. Without drama.

Something that had been holding me steady cracked right in front of my eyes, and no amount of apology could unsee what had already been seen.

From that moment on, nothing between us was innocent anymore.

Every reassurance had a shadow.
Every explanation needed effort.
Every photo carried memory.

That day didn't end the relationship.

But it ended something else.

The version of me that believed without fear.

And once that version leaves,
love doesn't disappear —
it **changes shape**.

In her defense, Shasi said she had hidden the photo.

Not erased it.
Not lied about its existence.

Hidden it.

Because she *knew* I would get angry.

That explanation didn't calm me. It deepened the crack.

So I asked her two questions — not loudly, not cruelly, but with the kind of sharp clarity that comes after shock.

First:
"If I had found it myself later??… have you thought about what would have happened then? How I would have reacted?"

Second:
"Why click the photo at all? Why agree to it? I told you to stay away — especially from Sumeet and Rishi. Why stand there?"

That was when it hit hardest.

Because it wasn't just *boys in a frame*.
It was **the same boys**.
Again.

In a different setting.
After everything that had already been said.

I told her something else too — something I had never said so directly before.

"If you want to be friends with them, say it clearly. I won't stop you. I won't judge you. I'll allow it."

I meant it.
I was ready to hear an answer I didn't like, just to stop guessing.

But her response came immediately.

"No. I don't want anyone. You are enough. I don't want friends. I don't want anyone else."

That sentence should have reassured me.

It didn’t.

Because it wasn’t about permission anymore.
It was about **patterns**.

I told her about the mentality of boys.
Not angrily — fearfully.

I told her things I had grown up hearing.
Things we read in the news.
Things no one wants to admit but everyone knows.

That even cousins aren’t always safe.
That girls aren’t always safe — even inside their own families.

I told her I wasn’t asking her to isolate herself.
I was asking her to be **careful**.
To not give signals accidentally.
To not stand in frames that get misunderstood.

I was afraid.

Because I was far from her.
And distance makes imagination cruel.

Still, I stayed angry.

For two or three days, I didn’t talk to her properly.

Not silent — but distant.
Replies without warmth.
Words without softness.

Not punishment.
Protection.

June didn’t stop for us, though.

Life kept happening around the damage.

It was the month of the **ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024**.

Cricket became my relief.

I’m a huge cricket fan. And during those days, India’s matches were the only time my chest felt light again. For a few hours, I could sit inside something uncomplicated. Something with rules. Something where effort led to results.

Shasi didn’t care much about watching.
She only checked scores — mostly with me.
She shared happiness, not obsession.

Sometimes she got furious.

She said I was too desperate for matches.
That I gave cricket more attention than her.

Maybe she wasn't entirely wrong.

But cricket didn't demand explanations.
It didn't carry history.
It didn't hide things.

In June, we loved each other — but we also **clashed**.

Not once.
Repeatedly.

Small issues stacked beside big ones.
Fear beside affection.
Reassurance beside resentment.

We were still saying "I love you."

But now those words were doing more work than before.

Because June wasn't about falling apart.

It was about **holding together something that was already cracked**.

And every day after that screen-share moment,
I wasn't asking myself *if* I trusted her.

I was asking myself **how much damage love could survive**.

June didn't give us space to heal.
It carried us somewhere else instead.

That month, I went on a summer trip with my nuclear family. Darjeeling. Sikkim. Mountains, clouds, long roads that curve instead of rush. It was supposed to be distance. Supposed to be relief. Time with family I already knew I had neglected.

But fear doesn't respect geography.

Even there, even while moving between destinations, Utsav found a way back in.

New accounts.
New usernames.
Photos and videos uploaded with intention, not nostalgia.

The hints were never subtle.
Words like *cheater* hidden in usernames.
Enough to be understood. Enough to disturb.

He couldn't message me anymore. I had already locked that door. My Instagram settings were clear: unless we followed each other, no message could reach me. He knew that.

So he went to her.

This time, Shasi told me she wanted to handle it herself.

She asked me to remove her Instagram account from my device.

I asked why.

She said, "I'll face him alone."

That sentence didn't sound strong.
It sounded burdened.

I agreed — but only after asking for one thing.

That she would share **everything**.
All screenshots.
No gaps.
No filters.

She promised.

They talked.

While I was travelling — between roads, between hotels, between places that were supposed to feel peaceful — my phone became heavy again.

She sent the screenshots.

I read them carefully.

Utsav's demand was clear.

He didn't ask for apologies.

He didn't ask for closure.

He wanted access.

He told her to follow him on Instagram.
To stay there.
To not block him.
To talk occasionally.

Not friendship.
Control.

My heartbeat spiked while reading it. I could feel it physically, sharp and fast, like my body was preparing for something it couldn't see.

I asked her directly what she was going to do.

She said nothing.

She said she blocked him.
She said she deleted her account.

That should have been relief.

It wasn't.

Because when I looked again at the screenshots, something felt wrong.

The chats weren't continuous.

Questions appeared without answers.
Replies existed without prompts.
Time gaps didn't align.

It looked like pieces of a conversation — not the whole thing.

I asked myself the question I didn't want to ask.

Why weren't all replies there?
Why did his questions jump forward?
Why did the flow feel edited?

I felt the anger return — heavier this time.

Not explosive.
Focused.

Because this wasn't about Utsav anymore.

This was about **selective truth**.

She had promised transparency.

But what I was seeing felt curated.

And that realization hurt more than his threats ever could.

Because an enemy attacking you from outside is frightening.

But doubt growing **inside** someone you love
is destabilizing.

That day, while standing in places people travel to feel small and peaceful, I felt neither.

I felt large with questions.
Crowded with fear.
And cornered by a truth I couldn't prove but couldn't ignore.

June was no longer about arguments.
Or jealousy.
Or misunderstandings.

It had become about **what I was being shown versus what I was being asked to believe**.

I asked her about the missing conversations.

Not once.
Not gently.

I asked again.
And again.

About the gaps.
The hidden replies.
The screenshots that didn't line up.

She hesitated.

Even through text, I could feel it — fear, delay, avoidance. She was scared. Crying. I knew it. And still, I pushed.

Because at that point, reassurance meant nothing without truth.

I asked her why she was so afraid of Utsav.
Why his presence still had power over her.
Why pieces of the story kept appearing only when I forced them into the light.

And then I asked the question I didn't want to ask.

Whether they had shared nudes.

She said no.

I didn't stop.

I asked again.
Harder.

She still said no.

So I stretched it further.

And then the answer changed.

She said one or two times.

The shift didn't shock me — it confirmed something I had already felt.

I asked specifics.
Whether it was in undergarments.
Whether it was without clothes.

She said once each.

And while she was telling me this, she spoke like a victim.

But I knew something she wasn't saying.

At the time it happened, she wasn't helpless.
She wasn't forced.
She wasn't trapped.

She had enjoyed it then.

Only now, when consequences followed, did the narrative change.

Hearing these things, something clicked inside me.

Not jealousy.

Not disgust.

Understanding.

A cold, painful understanding.

I told her quietly,

"Now it makes sense."

She didn't reply.

"It makes sense how he manipulated your mother so easily."

My chest felt tight while saying it.

"If he already had explicit photos of you… then of course it was easy for him. Of course he could twist the story. Of course he could make your mom believe anything."

I wasn't blaming her.

But I wasn't protecting the truth either.

"You didn't just give him memories," I said, "you gave him weapons."

Silence filled the space after that.

Because sometimes the scariest thing isn't what someone did.

It's realizing how that past still has power over your present.

That's what hurt the most.

Not what happened —
but how it was being framed.

I pushed further.

I asked directly whether she was a virgin.
Whether they had sex.

That's when she stopped answering the questions and changed the direction completely.

"If you're not happy with me, then leave me."

I told her it wasn't about happiness.
It wasn't about leaving.

It was about truth.

I told her something that had been building inside me for weeks.

"Every time I re-open your past, I find something new. Why didn't you tell me everything at once?"

There was a pause.

Longer than before.

Then she said they hadn't had sex.

I didn't believe it easily.

So I asked again.
And again.

Every time, the answer stayed the same.

No.

But with each repetition, something else appeared.

Begging.

"Please don't leave me."
"It's okay if you don't want to talk."
"Just don't leave."
"I love you."

Those words weren't comforting anymore.

They felt like anchors thrown to stop me from drifting away — not answers meant to hold me steady.

At the same time, Utsav was still there.

Blackmailing her.
Threatening to tell her mother that she was now in a relationship with me.

Fear wrapped itself tighter around everything.

My trip was ruined.

Not visibly.
Not outwardly.

I smiled.
I laughed.
I stood in photos like someone who was present.

But inside, I was fighting battles no one could see.

I didn't talk to Shasi properly for days.

Not angrily.
Not fully.

Because every conversation reopened wounds that hadn't even closed yet.

She kept breaking my trust.

And still — this is the part I don't understand even now — I kept loving her.

Not blindly.
Not peacefully.

But stubbornly.

In the days that followed, we tried to make things normal again.

She tried to regain my trust.
She spoke carefully.
She reassured often.

And I let it happen.

Not because I was healed.
Not because I was convinced.

But because something in me still couldn't let go.

That’s where this chapter ends.

Not with resolution.
Not with clarity.

But with a man still loving someone
even after seeing how fragile his trust had become.

And that, more than anything else,
terrified me.

Chapter 14: When Love Became Responsibility

Description: *College resumes, time moves forward, and love continues — but not unchanged. This chapter captures a stretch where reassurance becomes habit, care turns into obligation, and unseen pressures begin shaping decisions long before they are spoken.*

By July 2024, it was time for me to return to the hostel again.

Nothing dramatic had happened. We were still talking. Still trying. Still choosing softness where we could. I was doing what I had learned to do best by then — showing love more carefully, more deliberately, as if loving harder could keep things steady.

When we met on 25 May, she had given me many things she had made with her own hands. Small art and craft pieces, shaped patiently, thoughtfully. She told me I was the first person she had ever given something handmade to. That detail stayed with me. It made me feel chosen in a way words couldn't.

She also gave me a panda soft toy.
She used to call me panda — because I was a little chubby, because it made her smile. Holding it felt personal in a way I wasn't ready to carry into a shared hostel room. Those gifts weren't just objects. They were vulnerable. They could be lost, damaged, questioned. And I didn't trust the world around me enough to protect them.

So I chose something else.

I printed the photo from that day — the one where we were hugging. I framed it. Not because it mattered less, but because it was safer. A photo could be replaced if it broke. A frame could be renewed. The memory would remain even if the object didn't.

I told myself it was practical.
But somewhere inside, I knew it was also cautious.

I planned to keep the frame on my study table in the hostel. So that even on the busiest days, even when I was exhausted or distracted, I wouldn't forget her. Or maybe — I wouldn't forget *why* I was trying so hard.

She made me promise something that day.
That after marriage, we would keep that same photo frame in our room.

I promised.

At the time, it felt simple. Natural. Loving.

Only later did I understand what that promise really was — not about marriage, not about the future, but about reassurance. About holding something still in a phase where everything else felt uncertain.

I didn't realize then that even while promising forever, I was already choosing what would hurt less if it ever broke.

The day finally came.

I left home without much ceremony. I don't remember everything clearly, but I think my father came with me to drop me at the railway station. There were no long conversations. No instructions layered with emotion. Just presence. The kind that doesn't announce itself but stays with you anyway.

When the train arrived, I got on and found my seat. The journey was long — around twelve hours. Evening into morning. Enough time for boredom to creep in if you let it.

I didn't.

She was with me.

Almost the entire journey, we stayed connected. Sometimes on call. Sometimes on video call when the network allowed it. When signals weakened, we switched to text without frustration. It felt natural, like adjusting your pace to match someone walking beside you.

We talked about small things. Ordinary things. Things that wouldn't matter to anyone else. What I was seeing outside the window. What she was doing at home. Random thoughts. Half-formed sentences. Silence that didn't need filling.

There was no judgment between us in those moments. No pressure to perform. No need to explain ourselves. Just the comfort of being understood without translation.

The hours passed quietly.

By morning, the train slowed into the station, and the journey ended the way long journeys usually do — not suddenly, but gently. I got down, carrying my bags, my fatigue, and a version of closeness that had survived the night.

I reached the hostel.

Rooms, corridors, familiar noise returning. A place that had once been temporary, now becoming routine again. I settled in knowing that the next day, my third semester would begin.

Life was moving forward.

And at that moment, nothing felt broken. Nothing felt urgent. It felt like we had managed to carry each other across distance once again — not loudly, not dramatically — just steadily.

I didn't know then how much weight I was already carrying into that semester [3rd Semester].

But that night, after a twelve-hour journey, it felt enough to arrive and still feel accompanied.

College life resumed quickly, the way it always does. Classes restarted. Friendships picked up where they had paused. Assignments, lectures, hostel noise — everything slid back into place as if nothing fragile was being carried underneath.

I managed my time the way I always did. Friends. Studies. Shasi. I didn't abandon my life for her, but I didn't keep her separate either. She was threaded through my days.

But something inside me had already changed.

When we talked, reassurance was no longer optional for me. It had become necessary. Sudden. Unplanned. I would ask her to share her screen without warning. She did. Sometimes immediately. Sometimes with hesitation I noticed but didn't comment on.

And sometimes, I saw things again.

Names I didn't recognize.
Chats I didn't understand.
Faces I had never been introduced to.

And sometimes — Sumeet.

Each time it happened, my mind reacted before my heart could slow it down. The same damage reopening. The same place inside me getting hit again and again. It wasn't jealousy anymore. It was exhaustion. The kind that comes from recognizing a pattern you've already begged not to repeat.

One day, she asked me something casually.

Whether she could go to a spa.

I asked who would do it there.

She said men.

That word alone was enough.

Stranger men. Again. Different place, same problem. Different setting, same threat. I didn't react calmly. I couldn't. My anger wasn't loud, but it was sharp. Because it felt like no matter how clearly I explained myself, the same situations kept returning with new names.

Around this time, she started saying something that sounded like trust but felt like responsibility being pushed onto me.

She told me I was wiser than her.
That she always made mistakes.
That she needed my guidance.

She said she would ask me before going anywhere or doing anything important, because she didn't trust her own decisions.

At first, it sounded like respect.

Then it became a trap.

Because when she went somewhere without telling me, the explanations followed afterward.

"I was with Priya."
"I was with mumma."

If that was true, then why not tell me before?

I asked that question more than once.

Eventually, I stopped arguing and started protecting myself instead. I told her clearly: if she went anywhere, she had to inform me. And if she said she was with someone, she had to show proof.

Not because I wanted control.

Because she had already broken trust too many times for words to work anymore.

She promised.

She said she would send proof every time [Just a photo of with whom she was, she can't send].

Sometimes she did.
Sometimes she didn't, I still believed that she went with her friends [Priya & Preeti] but at least a proof can give me relief.

And every time she didn't, something inside me tightened further. Not anger alone. Not fear alone. A mix of both, burning slowly.

By then, I wasn't building trust anymore.

I was **checking damage**.

I couldn't relax.
I couldn't assume.
I couldn't believe without verification.

Love had stopped feeling safe. It had turned into vigilance. Screensharing. Explanations. Proofs. Promises that didn't always arrive.

And the truth I didn't want to say out loud was already clear to me:

I could not rebuild trust with someone who kept putting it back in the same places it had already shattered.

I wasn't becoming stronger.

I was becoming tired.

And that tiredness was no longer about her actions alone — it was about what staying like this was doing to me.

I don't remember the exact moment it happened.
There was no argument. No announcement. No clear break.

One day, Priya was simply gone from my life.

The connection between me and her was cut off quietly, deliberately. I never fully knew whether it came from jealousy, insecurity, or something else entirely. All I knew was that it didn't happen by accident.

Shasi started telling me things about Priya. That she wasn't good. That she wasn't careful around boys. That she had a boyfriend and went with him into a room at TSP café. She didn't say it directly, but the implication was clear. A boy and a girl alone in a room meant something inappropriate must have happened. According to her, Priya was the kind of person who made bad choices.

She framed it like concern.
Like warning.

But slowly, it worked.

I started seeing Priya through Shasi's eyes instead of my own.

Around that time, the aviation institute asked the students to prepare their CVs. Shasi didn't know how to do it, so I made hers. Properly. Carefully. The next day, she showed it to her instructor. The ma'am appreciated it, used it as a reference, and told the class about it. Shasi proudly said her partner had made it for her.

That same day, Priya reached out to me.

She asked if I could make one for her too.

It didn't feel wrong.
It didn't feel secretive.

They were like sisters. That's how it had always been. So I casually asked Shasi. She replied, "Do whatever you want." I took her words at face value.

I made Priya's CV.

That's when everything shifted.

Shasi wasn't happy. She wasn't calm. She was angry. The problem was no longer the CV. The problem was that I had helped Priya at all. That I still had a connection with her. That Priya existed in my space.

And once again, I chose.

Not after thinking long.
Not after negotiating.

I ended the connection with Priya.

Not because Priya had done something wrong.
Not because I believed everything that had been said about her.

But because Shasi mattered to me more than anyone else.

That had become my pattern.

I followed her instructions.
I adjusted myself.

I removed people.
I cut ties.

Every time, it was to prevent her insecurity from growing. To keep peace. To make her feel safe.

And I did it willingly.

But there was one question I never asked out loud, even as it kept getting louder inside me:

What about me?

Who was protecting my peace?
Who was adjusting for my insecurity?
Who was choosing *me* the way I kept choosing her?

I was doing everything to keep her comfortable.
And slowly, quietly, I was erasing my own discomfort instead of addressing it.

By then, I wasn't just in love.

I was obedient to the fear of losing her.

And that was the moment I should have stopped and asked myself something honest:

How much of myself am I allowed to lose before this stops being love?

August arrived quietly.
It was my birthday month.

The last time she had been with me on my birthday, she had forgotten it completely. That memory hadn't left me. So when, 7 to 10 days remaining, she kept reminding me — wishing me in advance, telling me my birthday was coming — I noticed. I didn't question it. I just let it exist.

Around that time, Utsav's presence reduced. The follow requests slowed down. The noise softened. We still fought — misunderstandings didn't disappear — but we stayed together. That itself felt like effort. Like choice.

I helped her with her assessments.
She helped me stay steady.

For the first time in a while, my mind wasn't constantly scattered. I could focus better. My academics improved. I started doing well in exams again. Somewhere between deadlines and late-night calls, we found a fragile rhythm.

We talked romantically.
Sometimes explicitly.

Whenever we got the chance, distance dissolved through screens. It wasn't innocent anymore, but it was mutual. Even with misunderstandings happening in the background, we kept choosing to stay.

When my birthday finally arrived, she wished me exactly at 12 a.m.

That mattered more than I admitted then.

She had ordered gifts for me. I opened them myself after they arrived. One was a box of chocolates. The other was a panda lamp — with my name on it. Something soft, warm, personal.

It was my first birthday away from home.
No family.
No familiar walls.

And she stayed with me through it. Made it feel less empty. In that moment, it felt like I wasn't alone in the city I had started calling mine.

Two weeks later, it was her birthday.

I had already planned for it. I had ordered gifts in advance. One was a soft toy — a dog. She loved dogs. And ever since 2018, I had a St. Bernard named Charlie. She used to ask about him often. Ask how he was. Ask me to send photos. The gift felt right.

I had also sent a winter wear of her.

It was black and blue colour. I don't remember the details clearly anymore. Not because they weren't important — but because what followed later blurred many good memories. Trauma has a way of doing that. It doesn't erase the past; it overshadows it.

But at that time, August didn't feel heavy.

It felt like balance.
Like effort was finally meeting effort.
Like staying wasn't a mistake.

We were still choosing each other — even with everything unresolved.

And for a while, that felt enough.

August passed.
Then September passed too.

And somewhere in between, something quietly disappeared.

She stopped talking about the aviation institute.

Not gradually. Not naturally. Just… stopped.

Whenever I asked how her day was there, whether she talked to anyone, she gave the same answer every time. She said she sat alone in a corner. Quietly. That no one came to talk to her. That she barely interacted with anyone.

A girl like Shasi — expressive, extroverted, always surrounded by people — sitting alone every day, untouched by conversation.

It was hard to believe.
But belief had already become something I forced myself into.

I asked about Priya.
I asked about Preeti.

She said they didn't behave properly with her. That they made fun of her. That they were still technically friends, but she didn't talk much to them anymore. Only when required. Only when necessary.

Again, the story felt too clean. Too convenient.

When I asked more, when I pushed gently and then not so gently, one name kept slipping out.

Sumeet.

Every time that name appeared, my chest tightened. Fury came faster than reason. Not because I wanted to fight — but because it felt like I was being walked around the same circle again, just with quieter footsteps.

At the same time, something else started worrying me.

Her health.

She had been feeling weak again and again. Small tasks exhausted her. Even minor extra work drained her completely. It wasn't new, but it was getting worse. I asked her why she wasn't seeing a doctor.

She said no one listened to her.

Her mother told her she would be fine. That she just needed to eat properly. That there was no need to waste money on doctors. That it wasn't serious.

The truth was simpler and more alarming.

Shasi barely ate.

Very little. Irregularly. Carelessly.
She was underweight — not drastically, but enough to matter.

I told her to go to a doctor by herself.

She was scared.

I told her to ask her mother again.

She refused.

So I pushed. Repeatedly. Harder than I was comfortable with. I insisted. I argued. I told her this wasn't negotiable. Eventually, under pressure — from her and indirectly from me — her mother agreed.

They went to the doctor.

And it turned out she wasn't imagining things.

She was deficient.
The doctor prescribed medicines.

That moment didn't bring relief the way it should have. It brought anger instead. Because it meant she had been unwell for a long time, and no one had taken her seriously until it couldn't be ignored.

There was something else too.

She often complained of breast pain. Regularly. Persistently. She told her mother about it. Her mother dismissed it as normal. Said it happens. Said it would go away.

So again, Shasi did nothing.

Not because she didn't want to — but because she had learned that speaking up didn't change outcomes.

Watching all this, I felt trapped between two roles I had never asked for.

A partner.
And a guardian.

I was the one noticing patterns. The one pushing for doctors. The one worrying about food, weakness, pain. The one trying to compensate for a system that didn't listen to her.

And slowly, something inside me started asking a question I had avoided for too long:

If I am the only one fighting for her well-being,
then who is fighting for mine?

By September, love wasn't just emotional anymore.

It was responsibility layered over neglect.
Concern layered over denial.
And anger layered over helplessness.

And I was getting tired of carrying all of it alone.

Around the same time, she enrolled in a government college.

It wasn't a regular college life. She didn't attend daily classes. She only had to go there for exams. Everything else — study material, understanding subjects, translations, preparation — happened somewhere else.

With me.

I helped her with everything. Notes. Explanations. Translations. Exam preparation. I didn't keep count. I didn't ask for acknowledgment. It had become normal by then — like breathing. Like something expected.

And slowly, the relationship changed shape again.

We weren’t just partners anymore.

We were responsibilities.

I was responsible for her academics, her clarity, her deadlines, her confidence.
She was responsible for my emotional balance, my stability, the reassurance that kept me functional.

We carried each other.

Not lightly. Not occasionally.

Constantly.

If one of us slipped, the other compensated. If one felt weak, the other became steady. It felt like teamwork — but it also felt heavy in a way teamwork isn’t supposed to.

There was no space to rest.

No space to be just tired without consequences.

Everything depended on everything else.

By then, love had stopped being something we shared freely.

It had become something we maintained.

And maintenance requires effort.
Requires vigilance.
Requires sacrifice.

And living like that doesn’t feel like partnership forever.

It feels like holding something together with hands that are already shaking.

By then, she had turned eighteen.

One day, she told me she needed to go to a cyber café to apply for her PAN card. I told her not to. Not because I wanted control — but because I knew I could do it myself. A cyber café would charge more. And if I applied, it would be clean. Direct. Only for what was required.

She agreed.

I asked her for the documents. The details. I resized everything to the exact specifications. Compressed the files. Filled the form carefully. And applied successfully.

It wasn’t effort anymore. It was instinct.

After it was done, she spoke softly. Almost hesitantly.

She asked me why I was doing so much for her.
She asked if I really liked her this much.

She said that in this time, people don't help someone without expecting something in return.

I told her simply that she was my love.

She used to call me "Life."
She called me "Hubby."

I replied with "Wifey."

It sounded sweet. It felt intimate. It felt like belonging.

And I leaned into it fully.

I did everything I could to keep her happy. Every possible effort. Every small task. Every responsibility she couldn't or wouldn't carry alone, I picked up without question.

At the time, it felt like devotion.

Only later did I understand something I wasn't ready to see then:

I wasn't just loving her.

I was replacing systems that failed her.
I was filling gaps that weren't meant to be mine.
I was becoming indispensable — not because I demanded it, but because I allowed it.

And when love turns into indispensability, it stops being equal.

It becomes something else.

October arrived.

I don't remember exactly when or why I did it, but one day I changed my WhatsApp display picture. It was a photo of us. Our faces close. Too close to be accidental. Half her face, half mine. One eye each. Intimate in a way that didn't ask permission.

I hid that display picture from my family members. From relatives. From people I didn't trust. I thought I had contained it.

Diwali holidays were approaching. I was still in the hostel, just a few days away from going home, when my father called me.

He asked how I was. Normal questions. Familiar tone.

Then he paused.

And asked, almost casually,
"Why can't I see your DP?"

My mind froze.

Before I could answer, he continued,
"I can see two eyes."

From the background, I heard my grandmother's voice.
"What eyes?"

That was when fear settled properly.

I was scared of many things in my life, but I had always been most afraid of my grandmother. Her presence carried weight. Her silence carried judgment. She was head of our house.

My father then said,
"Send me her photo."

I dropped the call.

For a few moments, I was just staring at the screen. Then I called him back.

I told him I would explain everything when I came home. That I would tell him properly. I asked him not to tell anyone about this yet. Especially not at home.

He agreed.

That "okay" felt heavier than anger would have.

When I told Shasi about it, she laughed. Teased me. Asked how I was going to face my father now.

I told her not to be so happy.

I said, what if he asks me to end everything?

Her laughter stopped.

The teasing disappeared. She grew quiet. Worried. She started asking questions she didn't have answers to. What would my father decide. What would happen to us. What if he didn't agree.

For the first time in a long while, fear wasn't only living inside me.

It was shared.

October didn't bring a fight.

It didn't bring a breakup.

That love, once hidden carefully, had started showing up in places I couldn't control. And that no matter how much I adjusted, protected, or carried things alone — the next decision might not be mine to make.

The chapter didn't end with a conclusion.

It ended with waiting.

Waiting for Diwali.
Waiting for home.
Waiting for a conversation that could change everything.

And for the first time, I wasn’t afraid of losing her.

I was afraid of what staying might cost next.

Chapter 15: Before Everything Fell Apart

Description: *Support arrives from unexpected places, but danger grows closer. As trust fractures under silence, choice, and exposure, this chapter traces the moment where love continues — yet no longer feels safe to stand inside.*

I was nervous the first time I went home.

Not the usual kind of nervousness.
The kind that sits quietly in your chest and waits.

I reached home while my father was still at work. The house felt familiar, but I didn't. I kept replaying conversations in my head, wondering how much truth would be too much truth.

He returned in the evening.

When he saw me, he smiled.
Not a questioning smile. Not a suspicious one.
Just a warm, ordinary smile. That alone eased something inside me.

After dinner, I went to his room.

I didn't prepare a speech.
I just told him everything.

I told him about Shasi.
How we met.
How we got into a relationship.
How things ended.
And how, after time and silence, we found our way back again.

I told him the truth about 25 May.

That Ayodhya wasn't just a temple visit.
That the real reason I went was to meet her.

I didn't exaggerate.
And I didn't hide things either.

But I also didn't tell him the negatives about Shasi.
Not because I was lying —
but because that wasn't the story I was telling him.
I was telling him *why she mattered*, not why things were difficult.

He listened.

Quietly.
Without interrupting.
Without changing his expression.

And then he accepted it.

Just like that.

No anger.
No lecture.

No sudden conditions.

My father accepted the relationship.

When I told Shasi, we were unbelievably happy.

Because for us, there were only two people in my family who could become obstacles.

My father.
And my grandmother.

And now, my father was on our side.

It felt like the hardest door had opened.

We started believing again.
That somehow we could manage grandma too.
That with time, with requests, with patience, she might agree.

We believed that if my family and Naveen bhaiya spoke to Shasi's family, things could work there as well. That resistance would soften. That conversations could change outcomes.

Around July — I don't remember the exact month — Shasi and I told Naveen bhaiya about our relationship.

He supported us too.

For the first time in a long while, it felt like the future wasn't completely closed.
Like the road was difficult, but not blocked.

And for a moment,
that was enough.

Somewhere in between all of this, life was still doing what life does when it isn't collapsing.

We started playing Minecraft together.

It had begun much earlier, even before the Diwali holidays. After classes, it slowly turned into routine. Not planned, not discussed. Just something we did. She was new to Minecraft. I wasn't. I taught her everything — how to survive the first night, how not to panic when darkness fell, how to build instead of just hide.

We built there.
And in a strange way, we built memories too.

Those hours didn't feel like games. They felt like presence because while playing we were connected on voice calls so we can hear each other's expressions. Like spending time together sometimes without needing words. Minecraft became our quiet space — predictable, safe, ours.

College life had its own rhythm too.

By the third semester, my main trio was fixed: me, Kishan, and Siddhant.

Kishan became my roommate in the hostel. One more boy shared the room with us, but we barely talked to him. He existed in the background, while our days stayed loud and familiar. Kishan and I had already moved through college together for a while, so sharing a room felt natural, like nothing had changed.

Siddhant was different, he was Day Scholar.

He was playful. Loud. Always too close.

He teased me constantly. Pulled me into photos. Leaned in unnecessarily. Made sure he was always visible in my space. I'd forward those photos to Shasi, and she'd react exactly the way I expected.

She started calling him *"sautan."*

Not seriously.
Playfully.

The word itself was dramatic, but the feeling behind it wasn't. It was jealousy without threat. Possession without fear. Just fun. Just laughter. The kind that feels safe because nothing underneath it is shaking yet.

During Diwali, we did twinning.

Both of us wore yellow.

It wasn't planned weeks in advance. It just happened. A small coincidence that felt bigger because we noticed it together. Photos were clicked. Smiles were easy. Everything still felt aligned.

And then, quietly, Diwali holidays began slipping toward their end.

Classes were about to resume. Hostel life was waiting again. Routine was returning.

At that point, it didn't feel ominous.

It just felt like another transition.

In November, we got a two-week break before our semester exams, just before winter holidays.

Time slowed down a little.
Classes paused.
Routines loosened.

One day during those holidays, she had just returned from her aviation classes. She video-called me without earbuds. Her room door was locked. Nothing about the moment felt risky. It felt ordinary.

We talked for a while.

At some point, I said casually, “Okay, I’m going to take a bath,” and ended the call.

Just seconds after that, there was a knock on her door.

Her mother asked who she had been talking to.

Shasi said, “No one.”

Her mother didn’t argue. She said calmly, “I heard a boy saying he’s going to take a bath.”

That was enough.

Her mother asked about me.

And this time, Shasi told her everything.

Later, her mother asked Shasi to call me on speaker.

When the call connected, Shasi spoke carefully. Too carefully. She said, in front of her mother, that her mother knew everything and that she was saying all of this should end.

From her voice alone, I understood something important.

She wasn’t saying it because she wanted to.
She was saying it because she had to.

So I didn’t panic.

Her phone was taken after that. Not permanently. Just enough to make a point. And later, she got it back.

What surprised me was what *didn’t* happen.

Her mother didn’t shout.
She didn’t threaten.
She didn’t attack.

I felt — maybe optimistically — that she was somewhat okay with me.

I think the reason was simple.

Shasi had told her mother that we were friends.
Not that we were in a relationship.

And because of that one distinction,

we stayed safe.

For the moment.

After that, I began understanding what her home was really like.

Her mother used to taunt her often.
Not loudly.
Not once or twice.

Repeatedly.

Almost every argument led back to the same place.

Utsav.

Her mother would say that Shasi had destroyed the family's name. That she had brought shame. That because of what Utsav had told her, people would always look at them differently. Those words weren't said to correct her. They were said to remind her.

Shasi cried a lot during that time.

Not dramatic crying.
Quiet, exhausted crying.

The kind where you stop expecting comfort.

I stayed with her through those moments. On calls. On messages. Sometimes saying things, sometimes just staying present so she wouldn't feel alone while being blamed for something she hadn't even been allowed to explain.

That was the environment she lived in.

A house where accusations were normal.
Where trust had already cracked.
Where mistakes were remembered, but explanations were never fully heard.

Understanding this didn't excuse everything that happened later.

But it explained the fear.

Why she panicked so easily.
Why authority terrified her.
Why even small confrontations felt like disasters to her.

That wasn't just her nature.

That was her home.

Around that time, another name kept entering my life more often than I liked.

Aryan.

At first, it didn't look serious.

One day she told me she was going to a family function. Some cousins would be there. Dhruva. Harsh. Normal names. Normal gathering. I just told her one thing.

“Be careful.”

She hesitated while answering.

Not clearly yes.
Not clearly no.

That hesitation stayed with me.

I tried to ignore it.

Exams were close. I told myself I was overthinking.

Then, a few days later, something else happened.

Aryan came to her house with Naveen bhaiya.

Casually. Like it was nothing.

They invited her to Harraiya. Said it was Aryan’s parents’ marriage anniversary.

She asked me if she should go.

I said no.

Directly.

Not possessive. Not dramatic.

Just no.

Because I knew Aryan.

And now the reader [you] needs to know too.

Aryan wasn’t misunderstood.
He wasn’t “flirty.”
He wasn’t “friendly.”

He was calculated.

He treated girls like collections.

He had shown me videos.
Photos.
Private moments that were never meant to be shared.

Some were his girlfriends.
Some were friends.
Some were relatives.

He showed them the way people show trophies.

Foreplays.

Laughing.

Proud.

Like consent didn't matter. Like boundaries were jokes.

That was the kind of boy he was.

Not rumours.

Not assumptions.

Playboy.

Things I had seen with my own eyes.

That's why I told her everything even before the day she had to go Harraiya.

Clearly.

Repeatedly.

Still, she asked again.

Requested.

Tried to convince me.

I kept refusing.

Then one day, she stopped asking.

She packed her bag and went anyway.

Without me agreeing.

Without even properly informing me.

Just… went.

That hurt more than anything.

Not Aryan.

Not the function.

The choice.

Because I wasn't stopping her out of insecurity.

I was trying to protect her from someone I knew wasn't safe.

And she still chose to go.

I was furious.

But exams were two days away. I couldn't explode even if I wanted to. Everything stayed trapped inside my chest.

She came back the next day.

Said they barely talked.

Said only "when needed."

Said nothing happened.

On the surface, I nodded.

Inside, something didn't believe her.

Trust had already been cracked too many times for words to fix anything instantly.

But I stayed quiet.

Because the same day she returned, my semester ended.

Winter break started.

And I was leaving for home.

We talked normally again.

Like always.

We even planned to meet in winter.

"I'll try," I told her. "Not sure, but I'll try."

When I reached home, something small happened that felt strangely warm.

My father, sitting in front of grandma, casually asked,

"So… when are you going to Ayodhya again?"

I froze.

Didn’t answer.

He smiled and teased grandma,

“He wants to go again. Ayodhya.”

He was making fun of me.

Lightly. Playfully.

For the first time, it didn’t feel like interrogation.

It felt like acceptance.

And the chapter ends there.

Not with anger.

Not with Aryan.

But with my father smiling.

As if the world was finally on my side.

Even though, somewhere else,

something had already started slipping.

In early December, my family went to Harraiya for a marriage function.

This time, Shasi’s family wasn’t invited.

Which meant I met Aryan alone.

Properly.

Without buffers.

Without distance.

At first, he behaved normal. Casual. Like nothing had ever been wrong.

Then he asked me suddenly,

“Bro… is Shasi still talking to you? You guys still together?”

I said no.

Not because it was true.

Because Shasi had told me not to reveal anything to him.

She had once said Aryan had some of her photos. She told me, *"If you ever meet him, just ask and take them."*

So I tried casually.

I said, "Send me her photos if you have."

He looked straight at me and laughed.

"You're fooling me. You're still in touch. Give me her number."

I said no.

Firmly.

"Never."

That's when the mask dropped.

Not slowly.

Instantly.

He started talking about her.

Not respectfully.
Not normally.

Like she wasn't a person.

Like she was an object he had inspected.

He said she looked "sexy."
Said when he shook her hand he "felt something."
Started describing her body in ways that made my skin crawl.

I won't even repeat everything he said.

But the way he spoke…

It wasn't admiration.

It was consumption.

Then he added something worse.

He said, from his "experience with girls," from the way she talks and behaves, she didn't look loyal.

He said it casually.

Like it was analysis.

Like he was an expert.

Every word felt dirty.

Not because it was true.

But because of who it was coming from.

This was the same guy who showed me private photos of girls like trophies.
The same guy who passed around videos without shame.
The same guy who had a girlfriend and still chased others.

And he was judging *her* character.

That irony burned.

That night, we slept in the same place.

He lay there scrolling through his phone, showing me more photos of other girls.

Laughing.

Bragging.

Collecting.

Like people were achievements.

And for the first time, I wasn't just angry.

I was scared.

Because if someone like him ever got closer to Shasi…
if he ever got her number…
if he ever manipulated his way in…

I knew exactly what kind of person he was capable of being.

Not a mistake.

A pattern.

When I came back home, all that anger had nowhere to go.

So it went to her.

I shouted.

More than I ever had.

Not calmly.

Not maturely.

Just anger.

We fought badly.

Words weren't chosen carefully. They were thrown.

And somewhere in that fight, she broke down.

Later, she told me she had hurt herself.

Cuts.

Below the wrist.

More than one.

Not deep, but enough to show pain.

That news didn't calm me.

It didn't make me feel closer.

It made me feel worse.

Because now everything felt tangled.

Anger. Guilt. Fear.

Then she said something that stayed with me.

She said sometimes I reminded her of Utsav.

That comparison hit harder than anything Aryan had said.

Because Utsav was the person she feared the most.

And somehow, in her eyes, I had started looking like him.

We had planned to meet on 14 December.

But after that fight, she told me not to come.

Said there was no need.

Not coldly.

Just hurt.

Like she didn’t want to see me.

That’s when something inside me started collapsing.

Not loudly.

Quietly.

Depression doesn’t arrive with noise.

It arrives like fog.

I started getting lost mid-thought.

While doing normal things.

Just… blank.

My father noticed two or three times.

“Where are you lost?” he asked.

I always said, “Nothing. Just thinking.”

But I wasn’t thinking.

I was sinking.

And that’s where this chapter truly ends.

Not with Aryan.
Not with fights.
Not with drama.

But with me sitting in my own house,

physically present,

mentally disappearing.

Chapter 16: A Quiet Before Everything

Description: *As the year comes to a close, reassurance settles in and unresolved tensions momentarily fall quiet. This chapter lives in a fragile stillness — a time when peace feels earned, comfort feels real, and nothing yet demands urgency.*

Shasi was hurt. Deeply.

But slowly, with time, she came back to herself.
And I stayed angry too — not at her, but at what she had done to herself. That anger wasn't loud. It was protective. Fear disguised as frustration.

When things finally calmed down, her voice changed.

It softened.

And in that soft, almost hesitant voice, she asked me something that mattered more than all our fights.

"Are you coming to meet me?"

There was no drama in the question.
No pressure.
Just vulnerability.

I didn't hesitate.

"Of course I'll come," I said.

We decided to meet at the same place where we had first met properly. The place that already held memory. But this time, we planned something different. Different temples. A different ghat. As if changing the route could also change what we were carrying inside.

I told my father that I wanted to meet her.

He didn't say yes immediately.
He said, "I'll think and tell you."

Later, I asked again — this time in front of my mother.

That's when he smiled and reframed it casually.

"You also want to visit your nani's house, right?" he said.

Then he added, like it was already decided,
"So on the 14th, you go with your mumma. First meet her, then leave for your nani's place."

Just like that.

No interrogation.
No tension.

Everything settled quietly into place.

We fixed the date.

14 December.

It worked for her too.

That morning, she had a college exam. After that, she told her mother she would be going out with Priya. It sounded normal. Harmless. Easy to allow.

Her mother agreed.

And suddenly, all the obstacles we had been staring at for days disappeared.

The date was fixed.
The plan was clear.
The excuses were aligned.

And then the day came.

14 December.

It was morning.

The driver arrived on time. Bags were already packed. Nothing was rushed. Nothing felt unusual from the outside.

My mumma and I left together.

At home, only my father and my younger brother knew the truth — that before going anywhere else, we were first going to Ayodhya. Everyone else believed what they needed to believe.

Shasi went to college that morning to give her exam.

While we were on the road, her exam ended.

She texted me.

And then she told me something else.

Her periods had started.

I asked immediately, “Are you still coming?”

There was no pause.

“Yes,” she replied.

That one word carried more strength than reassurance ever could.

This time, she reached before me.

She was already there, waiting.

Mumma had other plans. She told me about a girl she had been close to during her school days. A best friend she hadn't met in years. That friend lived in Ayodhya.

She said she wanted to meet her.

I told her it was fine.

I said she could go with the driver, and I would stay.

I didn't say why.
I didn't need to.

Everything aligned without explanation.

When we reached Ayodhya, I stepped out of the car.

My mumma and the driver left together.

And just like that,

I was alone.

With her.

I thought this meeting would end our disputes.

That if we sat together again, properly, everything sharp would soften on its own.

We went to the ghat first.

The river was calm. Not silent, just unhurried. We sat there for a long time. Talked about nothing important. Clicked photos. Let time stretch without checking it.

And somewhere in that calm, I said something I had been carrying for a while.

Because trust, once damaged, doesn't disappear just because the setting is beautiful.

I told her that I was still struggling. That my mind kept looping back to doubts I didn't want to have. I asked her, carefully, if she would be willing to share her WhatsApp with me on my second phone. Not forever. Not as control.

Just until I felt steady again.

She paused.

Not long enough to feel like refusal.
Long enough to feel like weight.

Then she agreed.

I told her something immediately after — that the moment my trust felt restored, I would remove it myself. That this wasn't something I wanted to hold onto. It was something I wanted to stop needing.

She nodded.

Nothing dramatic followed.
No argument.
No justification.

I asked her to show cuts of her hand. I saw and told her not to repeat it again. She nodded.

Then we walked closer to the water and let our feet slip into it.

Cold. Steady. Grounding.

While we sat there, a thought crossed my mind — one that had lived with me quietly for years.

I was born on the night of Janmashtami.
27 August 2005.

The day Lord Krishna was born ended at midnight. And just after that, I was born. Technically the next day. In my house, it was believed that children shouldn't be named directly after gods. So my name came from Krishna — shortened, softened.

Krish.

And somewhere along the way, without thinking too deeply about it, Shasi had become Radha to me. I used to tell her that. Half-joking, half-believing.

While our feet were in the water, I touched her feet.

Not to show her.
Not to make a moment out of it.

It came naturally.

Out of respect.
Out of gratitude.
Out of something quieter than romance.

She didn't say anything much.

After that, we left the ghat and went for lunch.

On the way, she told me what she wanted to eat. I agreed immediately. No discussion. No hesitation.

Then we passed a small shop.

I told her, "Whatever you want — just put your hand on it. I'll buy it."

She laughed and placed her hand on me instead, like a child testing how serious I was.

I smiled and said, “No. Seriously.”

This time, she picked small things. Simple things. The kind children are drawn to without reasons. I bought them all without thinking twice.

At the restaurant, I asked her again what she liked. She ordered on her own. When the food arrived, she looked at it quietly for a second and then smiled.

She said this was the first time during her periods that her cravings were actually being satisfied.

I didn’t say anything.

But inside, I felt light.

Because she was happy.
And because, for once, it felt like I had done something right.

Then my phone rang.

My mumma.

She said she had met her friend and that it was time to leave. We needed to reach my nani’s house on time.

The call ended.

And just like that, the pause we were living inside began to close.

She was still having cramps.

I could see it on her face even when she tried to act normal.

So while we were sitting together, I gently put my hand around her stomach and held her close, rubbing slowly, trying to ease the pain the only way I could.

Small gestures. Quiet care.

Later she told me that was her favorite moment of the day.

Not the temples because during periods, females are not allowed to step into temples.
Not the food.
Just that.

Being held.

Sometimes love is that simple.

When we reached the parking area, my mumma met her properly for the first time.

There was no awkwardness.

No interrogation.

Just warmth.

We clicked a photo together.

Me in the middle.
Shasi on one side.
Mumma on the other.

The two women who mattered the most to me, standing next to each other like it was the most natural thing in the world.

That photo instantly became my favorite.

It felt like two parts of my life finally standing in the same frame.

We sat in the car after that.

The driver in front. Mumma beside him.

And us in the back seat.

Before leaving the ghat, we had already joked about stealing one small private moment.

So we did.

Nothing loud.
Nothing reckless.

Just closeness.

Hands finding each other.
A quiet kiss.
The kind of intimacy that comes from comfort, not impulse.

We weren't kids anymore. We were eighteen. Old enough to understand what we were doing, and young enough to still believe forever was simple.

It didn't feel wrong.

It felt like trust.

After some time, I dropped her near the auto stand so she could go home easily. I waited until she properly sat inside and the auto started moving.

Only then did I walk back to the car.

Before leaving, we exchanged gifts.

I gave her a soft jacket, the kind that felt like touching a cat's fur, and chocolates.

She gave me a muffler and a small blue dinosaur soft toy.

Simple things.

But I decided right there that I would take both of them to the hostel with me when it reopened.

Some memories deserve to travel with you.

As we drove toward my nani's house, I kept replaying the day in my head.

The ghat.
Her smile.
The photo with mumma.
The small laughs.
The quiet care.

It felt peaceful.

Complete.

Maybe the best day of 2024.

And the part that stayed with me the most —

My mother liked her.

And like that, the year began to slow down.

Sometime in December — I don't remember the exact date — my father asked me something unexpectedly.

Not casually.
Not jokingly.

He looked at me and said,
"Are you sure you want to marry this girl?"

The question caught me off guard.

I hesitated.

Not because I didn't want to marry her —
but because I hadn't expected to be asked that question so soon.

I said yes.

My father nodded.

"Okay," he said.

Nothing more.

I told Shasi about it later.

We were happy. Relieved. Almost giddy. It felt like another door had opened quietly, without resistance.

And that's how the year ended.

Not loudly.
Not dramatically.

With acceptance.
With plans.
With peace.

At the time, it felt like stability.

Now I know it was something else.

It was the calm
before the biggest storm of my life arrived.

Chapter 17: The Last Time I Asked Why

Description: *A fragile stretch where hope survives out of habit rather than certainty. This chapter follows unanswered questions, shifting emotions, and the realization that understanding doesn't always arrive before loss.*

The year didn't start with silence.
It started with control.

On **1 January 2025**, I was not alone. I was with my family, on an outing to **Valmikinagar**, eating **Handi Mutton** the way we always did. There was no rebellion in it. No defiance. Just normal life.

She didn't see it that way.

Shasi didn't *dislike* that I was eating non-veg.
She **forbade it**.

Not advice.
Not concern.
A command.

That day, she told me strictly not to eat it. As if my body, my plate, my choices were suddenly hers to authorize. But I was with my family. Refusing food wasn't an option. Lying to her wasn't an option either. Not on New Year's Day. Not when honesty was the only thing I had left that still felt clean.

So I chose truth.

And we fought.

I remember being in the car, phone in my hand, the road moving forward while the conversation went nowhere. Words clashed. Tone hardened. Yet somehow, by the end of it, we did what we always did. We **consoled each other**, like two people patching cracks instead of asking why the wall kept breaking.

Soon after, my **4th semester** began.

I carried her things with me to the hostel. Her **muffler**. The **blue dinosaur soft toy** she had gifted me when we met in December. She kept the dog I had given her on her birthday. Before sleeping, we used to show each other our soft toys on video call. Two people holding symbols instead of solutions, pretending comfort could replace clarity.

But the December meeting hadn't solved anything.
It only paused the damage.

Arguments continued. And this time, the rot had a window.

I had access to her WhatsApp. I could see things. Not always clearly, but enough to know that looking would hurt me. So I did the only thing that felt like survival. I **looked less**. Focused on myself. Because the more I saw, the more it burned. And I wasn't trying to bleed every night.

Outside, my life looked perfect.

To my friends, I was the example.
Abhi said I had everything: a good college, good grades, a girlfriend, a supportive family.

Siddhant and Kishan pointed to me while talking to Shreyansh. *"See how loyal Krish is."*
They weren't exaggerating.

I didn't look at other girls.
I didn't flirt.
I didn't even talk casually.

Not because I was being watched.
Because I was committed.

And that's where the cruelty hides.

Because while everyone else saw balance, what I was actually doing was **shrinking myself** to keep something alive that was already decaying. I was loyal in a relationship where loyalty had started becoming a one-way effort. I was defending a peace that only existed when I stayed quiet.

Small events kept stacking up.
Not explosions.
Hairline fractures.

And I didn't know yet that the year wasn't warming up.
It was winding back, slowly, carefully, for a final blow.

The aviation institute announced it casually.
Mid-January.
Interviews for **ground staff at the airport**.

For her, it was opportunity.
For me, it became responsibility.

We started preparing immediately. Not side by side, but with me leading and her following. I guided her through everything. How to sit. How to speak. What kind of confidence looks natural and what sounds rehearsed. What questions to expect. Which answers to avoid. Which words to never use.

The night before the interview, I didn't sleep like someone waiting for good news. I stayed awake like someone guarding an outcome. I took her mock interviews, corrected her tone, stopped her mid-sentence when she drifted, reshaped answers until they sounded believable, not desperate.

We worked hard.
At least, I did.

The next morning, she left for the institute.

And the familiar feeling returned.
Not excitement.
Insecurity.

I knew Shasi's patterns. So before she left, I told her strictly, in clear words, not wrapped in affection.

Do not interact with **Sumeet** and **Rishi**.

No jokes.
No "just standing."
No excuses.

She replied with a short, careless **"hmm."**

Then she texted again.
They were leaving for the airport now. The interview location.

I asked how she was going.

She said by **auto**.

Then she added something extra, something unnecessary. She said all the other girls had gone with boys on bikes.

She was lying.

At that moment, I didn't know it.
And I didn't interrogate it either.

I felt relief instead.

Relief that *she* hadn't gone with boys. Relief that at least this time, at least for something important, she had chosen caution. I let myself believe it. I let the thought settle because believing her was easier than reopening fear before an interview I had practically prepared her for.

I didn't overthink it.
I didn't question it.

I trusted her.

Later, I would learn how that relief had been manufactured. How that sentence had been designed to calm me, not to tell the truth. And how easily I had accepted it because I wanted the day to go right.

But that morning, I didn't know any of that yet.

That morning, I thought I was being careful.
In reality, I was being **managed**.

Her interview didn't go smoothly.

An obstacle appeared immediately.

The interviewers made it clear they were looking for **graduated students only**. Shasi wasn't one. Priya wasn't either. For a moment, everything we had worked for looked like it would collapse right there, not because of performance, but because of eligibility.

That's when the aviation ma'am stepped in.

She spoke for them. Strongly. She told the interviewers that these two girls were talented, disciplined, and hardworking. That they deserved a chance despite not fitting the requirement perfectly. The panel hesitated, then agreed.

They were allowed to continue.

And Shasi passed.

She was shortlisted.

When she told me, she gave credit where it was due. She thanked the ma'am. And she thanked me. She said my guidance, my preparation, my mock interviews had helped her. I won't lie. I was shocked, but I was also proud. Especially because, objectively, Priya was better than Shasi in almost everything. Communication. Confidence. Presence.

Still, I told myself this: our hard work paid off.

For a brief moment, I let myself feel relief.

After congratulating her, I asked a question that had already been sitting in my chest all day.

About **Sumeet**.

She replied casually.
"We didn't talk."

I didn't accept it.

I asked again. More firmly.

She said, "Only what mattered, we talked."

That sentence didn't answer anything. It dodged it.

So I asked again. Not gently this time. Because by now, I knew her habits. I knew her patterns. I knew how easily truth arrived only after pressure.

That's when she flipped the script.

She asked me if I wasn't happy about her selection.
She asked me if I didn't want her to do the job.
She told me that if I had a problem with her working, I should have said it earlier.

We fought.

And then, finally, the truth slipped out.

"Yes," she said. "We talked."

Just like that.

Not as a confession.
Not as an apology.

As if it was inevitable.

That's when it hit me properly.

Lying wasn't accidental for her.
It wasn't situational.

It was default.

I knew her nature. Extroverted. Talkative. Thriving on attention. Someone who cannot stay silent in a room full of people. Expecting her to not interact at all was naïve, yes. But lying about it repeatedly wasn't nature. It was choice.

We fought again.

And in the middle of that fight, her phone rang.

She was officially selected.
Offer letter coming soon.

The moment that should have felt celebratory felt poisoned instead.

Because I already knew something else.

Rishi and Sumeet were shortlisted too.

They were selected.
They would receive offer letters.
They would work at the same airport.

I felt furious. Not just at her. At everything.

At destiny, for placing the same names in the same frame again and again.
At the situation, for feeding my insecurity instead of easing it.
And most of all, at the fact that truth never came freely from her.

I always had to drag it out.
Force it out.
Corner it.

And that's where the real damage was done.

Because trust doesn't break when people interact.
It breaks when honesty becomes conditional.

She didn't protect me with truth.
She protected herself with delay.

And standing there, watching her move forward into a workplace where the very people I feared would stand beside her every day, I wasn't asking dramatic questions anymore.

I was asking a simple, terrifying one:

How am I supposed to trust someone again when the truth only arrives after pressure?

And for the first time, I didn't have an answer.

When her offer letter arrived, work began immediately.

She had to go to the airport. Documents followed one after another. Forms, files, signatures. She sent me a document and asked me to apply her digital signature. I did it quickly, without delay. This had become normal. I always handled her documents. It was something she relied on me for.

One day, I was in class.

She needed to send some documents in a zipped file to some higher authority. She knew my schedule. She knew exactly when I would be free. She knew I would do it the moment I could.

She didn't wait.

Instead, she asked someone else.

I found out who when I saw her WhatsApp.

It was Sumeet.

The same name again. The same person. The same presence that kept appearing no matter how many times I tried to draw a line around it.

I wasn't in my senses anymore.

Why was it always Sumeet?
Why did he keep showing up exactly where I was already hurting?

I told her to block him. To delete his contact. We argued again.

Around the same time, she found out that her training would be batch-wise and that she would be sent to Gurugram. It was still Delhi NCR, but far enough to feel distant.

For the first time in a while, my mind started imagining something hopeful. This time, maybe we could meet in a different place. Not the same city. Not the same borrowed hours. I told her I wanted to explore Delhi with her. She was happy too, but she stopped me gently.

She told me not to see dreams already. To wait for confirmation.

Then came the first day of her job.

Before it began, I communicated clearly. I didn't give commands. I requested. I told her how fragile I was by then. No Sumeet. No Rishi. Not again.

By this time, my mental state was already deteriorating.

I wasn't just anxious. I was overwhelmed. My body had started absorbing what my mind couldn't release. Sometimes I punched the wall. Sometimes the window. Sometimes my head, not hard, just enough to interrupt the noise inside.

It wasn't anger.

It was helplessness.

My condition was getting worse, and I knew it. I wasn't fighting her anymore. I was fighting myself, trying to stay functional while standing inside a situation that refused to change.

And that was the moment I understood something quietly terrifying.

When love pushes you to hurt yourself just to survive the day, the problem is no longer insecurity or jealousy.

Something deeper is breaking.

And I was still standing inside it.

I was afraid in a quieter way too.

Her job was about to start, and with it, I felt like pieces of our routine were already slipping away. We wouldn't be able to watch movies together on screen share anymore. We wouldn't play Minecraft the way we used to, building things while talking about nothing. Those small rituals had held us together more than we admitted.

In the hostel, my mornings were different. I didn't wake up to alarms the way others did. I woke up to her voice. Every day, I would ask her to wake me up, and she did. Softly. Lovingly. That voice was the first thing I heard every morning. It never happened when I was at home. Only in the hostel. Only with her.

I started thinking that all of this would end.

Everything felt heavier. I told her what I was afraid of. She reassured me. She said let my job start first. Give me some time to adjust. Things won't change suddenly.

I agreed. I wanted to believe that routines could survive new realities.

On her first day at the airport, she made a new friend.

Her name was Rhea.

She told me Rhea was very friendly. That she stayed with her constantly. Asking if she was okay, how she was feeling, how her experience was going. It sounded comforting at first. Like she wasn't alone in a new place.

Rhea shared her own story too.

She told Shasi that her boyfriend didn't like this job category. According to him, the industry revolved around makeup, girls, attention, and appearances. He didn't trust the environment. Eventually, because of that, he broke up with her.

I listened to all of this quietly.

Around the same time, Priya and Shasi stopped being friends.

According to Shasi, Priya had started feeling jealous of her. She said she could sense it through her actions, through the way she behaved. From that point on, they stopped talking completely.

Just like that.

Another connection disappeared. Another circle closed. And again, I accepted the explanation the way I had learned to do by then, without questioning too much, without asking what was left unsaid.

Because by this point, I was already afraid of how much more could change.

And how much of us might quietly disappear with it.

At her home, things began to improve.

The atmosphere softened. People were happier. Slowly, she started getting respect again. The tension that had once defined that house loosened, and she seemed lighter because of it. She was happy, and I could hear it in her voice.

At my home, I told my parents too. Both my mumma and my father were happy. There was no resistance, no anger. One day, my father called me and said just one thing.

Don't give her commitment for marriage.

Nothing else. No explanation. I said okay, but the sentence stayed with me. I didn't understand why he felt the need to say it then. Still, I told Shasi about it. We brushed it off. We told ourselves it was normal. Parents talk like that. And besides, we were already committed, so it didn't matter.

We moved on.

Meanwhile, Shasi and Rhea grew closer. In just two or three days, their bond became strong, almost immediate.

One evening after work, Rhea called Shasi. She said she was feeling anxious. Her parents were not at home. She asked Shasi to come over.

Shasi's house was about fifteen minutes away. Her father or staff usually dropped and picked her up from the airport. Rhea's house was close to the airport.

Shasi asked me.

I said no.

After I refused, she still went and asked her mother. Her mother also said no. So nothing happened that evening.

The next morning, Shasi told me that Rhea's parents would return the following day. Until then, Rhea would stay at her house.

I said okay.

That day, we didn't talk much. I didn't push. I didn't question it. I told myself to give them some time. They were new friends. They needed space. And I thought stepping back, just for a day, was the mature thing to do.

I didn't know then how many times I would later regret choosing silence over clarity.

It was 26 January. Republic Day.

Before she went to work, I told her clearly not to click photos with Sumeet or anyone like that. Not angrily. Not accusingly. Just clearly.

She replied casually. She said she knew, and that she wouldn't click photos with them.

Later, after work, she sent me pictures. In those photos, she was only with female colleagues. On the surface, everything looked fine.

But something didn't sit right with me.

I remembered something from earlier. When she had been selected for the job, she had sent me photos that showed only girls. But later, when I saw the same event on her teachers' WhatsApp stories, I saw the full picture. Sumeet and Rishi were there too. And she had clicked photos with them. That memory came back immediately.

That's why this time felt fishy.

I was talking to her on one phone. On the other phone, I opened her WhatsApp. I think it was the chat with Rhea, I saw a photo where Sumeet was present. My heart started racing. I took that photo and sent it to her, asking what it was.

What happened next shattered whatever calm I had left.

She unblocked Sumeet.
Sent all the photos to him.
And blocked him again and removed him.

I saw it happen in real time. On my second phone. With my own eyes.

There was no misunderstanding. No assumption. No imagination.

I confronted her.

We fought badly. Not like before. This time, it was raw. Ugly. Out of control. I lost all sense. I punched the wall again, not because I wanted to hurt myself, but because my anger had nowhere else to go.

I wasn't thinking. I wasn't reasoning. I was furious.

I told her exactly what had been forming inside me for weeks, maybe months.

I told her it felt like Sumeet was her backup boyfriend.
That no matter what she promised, no matter what she said, he was always there. Waiting. Reappearing. Being protected.

I wasn't calm.
I wasn't measured.

I was broken, angry, and completely out of my senses.

And at that moment, something inside me crossed a line it could never come back from.

She shouted at me.

On text, she told me that she was now a working woman. That he was her colleague. That all of this was normal. The words didn't sound like her. It felt like someone else was speaking through her, someone colder, more defensive.

We fought again.

This time, I didn't talk to her properly for four or five days. Not completely silent, but distant enough to hurt. During that time, she told me something that shocked me more than the fight itself. She said that if I wasn't happy with her, I could leave her and find someone else.

I didn't expect that. Not from her.

Eventually, we consoled each other again. Like always.

And that's when it became a pattern.

Every morning, things were fine. She would get ready on video call in front of me. We would talk normally. She would leave for the airport, and everything would feel stable.

Then she would return.

And it was like she was a different person.

Her tone changed. Her patience disappeared. The warmth she carried in the morning felt replaced by irritation, defensiveness, distance. At night, we would again try to fix what broke during the day. We would talk. Calm each other down. Promise to do better.

And the next morning, it would repeat.

Sometimes, when we got time, we played Minecraft again. Not like before, but enough to pretend things were still normal.

10 February came. Our anniversary.

We celebrated it long-distance. Messages, calls, words meant to hold something together. But even on that day, the fight hadn't really ended. It was still there, just quieter.

The arguments were now over about small things.

One incident stayed with me.

She was at the airport when a random man gave her a sandwich. Someone unknown. She took it. She ate it.

I couldn't understand it. Who eats anything given by a random man? Why would she do that?

I asked her.

She replied angrily. She said she would never meet him again. That they didn't know each other. That she ate it, and it was over. As if that settled everything.

It didn't.

Moments like this kept reinforcing something I didn't want to accept. She liked attention. She needed it. After work, she posted her photos repeatedly on WhatsApp status. I knew why. People would see. People would praise. Her value, in her eyes, would rise.

She was an attention seeker.

And I was standing in a relationship where attention mattered more than reassurance, and explanations came only after damage was already done.

It was 12 February.

We were arguing about something again when she suddenly asked me why I had taken access to her WhatsApp. I answered honestly. I told her I didn't trust her, and I mentioned the Sumeet incident, how she had sent him photos, then blocked and removed him again.

Before I could even finish explaining, she told me to stop.

I also started to feel that when she was at the airport, she couldn't give me that much attention. I could feel that distance through her WhatsApp as well. Still, somehow, we managed to sort things out that evening.

Then came the next day.

13 February.

In the morning, everything was fine. We were happy. Normal. But when she returned from the airport, her mood was off again. I asked her what happened. She said nothing. I asked again. She replied that I would get angry, so I should leave it.

I told her to say it anyway.

That's when she said something else instead. She told me to remove my WhatsApp access.

The argument started immediately. I was furious again. And this is where my nature comes in. When I am angry, I don't talk. I know myself well enough to know that in anger I can say or do things that will only cause more damage. So I chose silence.

I removed the access.

For a while, I blocked her on WhatsApp and put my phone on airplane mode. Not to punish her, but to calm myself down. When we argue, I need distance to settle. Her nature was the opposite. She wanted a conclusion immediately, in that exact moment.

After some time, I unblocked her.

That's when she texted me something I still can't forget. She said she no longer had feelings for me. That love was finished.

I video-called her and asked her to say the same thing on call. She stayed silent. She just nodded. No explanation. No argument. She said she didn't want a relationship with me anymore and ended the call.

I called again.

I begged her. I told her I wouldn't doubt her anymore. That she could make friends. That I would change myself. Every time we argued in the past, I had said the same thing. If something about me hurt her, I was ready to change it. And every time, she had replied that there was no need to change, that she loved the original me.

That day, she said nothing.

She blocked me from everywhere.

I couldn't believe it. I didn't know what to do. My mind stopped working properly. I felt completely lost.

I called Naveen bhaiya and told him everything. He listened patiently to my entire story. After that, he said something that stayed with me. He said he felt that someone might be manipulating her. But he also said there was nothing we could do right now.

All we could do was give her time.

And that was the last thing I had left to offer.

The night came, but her message didn't.

I didn't sleep at all. I lay there, watching time move forward without mercy. Every hour passed, and every few minutes my hand reached for my phone again, hoping for something that never came. I tried to sleep, failed, checked the phone again. Over and over.

By early morning, around four or five, desperation gave me an idea.

I sent her one rupee through payment apps, first on FamPay, then on GPay. Not for money. Just for notification. Just to reach her somehow.

It worked.

She instantly unblocked me on WhatsApp and asked what happened. I apologized. She seemed normal, calm. She told me to sleep because I had classes.

It was technically 14 February.

I wished her Valentine's Day. She replied back. We exchanged "I love you." For a moment, it felt real again. I slept for maybe two hours. Then she called me to wake me up and get ready for class. The morning was good. Too good.

Everything felt normal.

But when she was on her way back from the airport, she texted me that she wanted to say something. I told her to go ahead.

She said she didn't love me anymore. That love was finished.

I asked her why she had said those things in the morning. She replied that it was only to calm me down at that moment.

Something inside me collapsed completely.

I told her to text me once she reached home. When she did, I video-called her. She didn't look at me. Not into my eyes. Not even at the screen properly. I could see tears, but no hesitation.

I kept asking her why she didn't love me anymore.

She said she would tell me only on one condition. That I wouldn't force her to stay.

I agreed. I just wanted to know.

She said I had started behaving like Utsav.

That comparison destroyed me. Being compared to him broke something fundamental inside me.

She said I was too controlling. That love wasn't possible anymore.

I cried. I begged. I told her I could do anything, change anything, become anything for her. She stayed firm. No emotion. Just one sentence repeated again and again. That she didn't love me anymore.

I asked her, crying, what I should tell my parents and my friends.

She replied, coldly, that I should tell them she died.

Then she ended the call.

And blocked me. Everywhere. Completely.

Every crack that had formed until now finally came together. The glass shattered.

I cried uncontrollably. I called Naveen bhaiya again. He told me to move on. He said she wasn't a good girl. That she had many pasts. That she had flirted with boys during lockdown, something she herself had

revealed in an argument earlier. He told me she had used me. That I did everything for her, and once she could stand on her own feet, she left. Naveen bhaiya also told that he thought Shasi had grown up and she might be a changed person by now, but it wasn't the case.

Nothing he said helped.

I then called my father on video call. He saw me crying and immediately got worried. I told him everything. His friend, Jaya aunty, also talked to me. They tried to motivate me, to lift me up. Nothing reached me.

I told my mumma too.

After that, my father blocked and deleted Shasi's number from my mumma's phone.

He took one promise from me. That I would not take any wrong step. I promised him.

He also told me to delete her photos, texts and everything.

The same day, he booked my airplane ticket for next week to bring me back home.

I had taken one week's leave from college, but I still had to stay one more week in the hostel. I went back to my room, hugged Kishan, and cried. I told him everything.

He was shocked. He couldn't believe it. The breakup of Shasi and Krish felt unreal to him.

After a while, he told me something that shocked me too. He said he had been jealous of me. That I had a girlfriend. That I had someone who loved me. That I spent time with her.

I didn't even respond. I just noted it silently.

A man with that mentality didn't deserve an answer.

That's where the chapter ends.

Not with closure.

But with everything broken at once.

Chapter 18: A Date I Don’t Celebrate

Description: *While the world celebrates love, he remembers loss. This chapter reflects on heartbreak, healing, and how certain dates stay with us not for what they promise, but for what they take away.*

Now a piece of me was gone.

Not missing in a way that could be searched for —
missing in a way that made my body forget how to stay calm.

My heartbeat started racing at random moments.
No trigger. No warning.
Just sudden anxiety, like my chest was preparing for something terrible that never arrived.

I kept asking myself the same question without answers.
Why did it happen?
Where did it break?
What did I miss?

I wasn’t just sad.
I was fractured.

Jaya aunty stayed connected with me through that time.
Every evening, we spoke on call. She tried to console me — gently, patiently — saying the things people say when they want to help but don’t know where the pain actually sits. I listened. I thanked her. Some days, her voice was the only thing keeping my evenings from collapsing completely.

In the evenings, I started going to the ground.
Not to play.
Just to walk and talk on the phone.

And everywhere I looked, life continued.

Couples sat close together.
Hands resting where they belonged.
Laughter. Touch. Kisses exchanged without fear.

No matter where I turned, I saw it.

Togetherness.

It hurt in a quiet, humiliating way — not jealousy, not anger — just the sharp awareness of what I had lost while the world refused to pause for it.

Most days, I couldn’t stay long.

So I changed the time I went out.

I started going only at sunset.

I don’t know why.
Maybe because the light was fading too.
Maybe because dusk doesn’t demand explanations.

I would stand there, phone in hand, and click photos of the twilight.
Not for memories.
Just to freeze a moment where day and night were equally unsure of themselves.

That felt familiar.

Kishan noticed the change in me. One day he asked,
“If anyone asks why you suddenly went home, what should I say?”

I didn’t think before answering.

I told him,
“Just say my girlfriend died in an accident. I couldn’t handle it, so I went home.”

The words came out easily.
Too easily.

Later, I realized why.

Because saying she died was simpler than explaining how someone can still be alive and yet disappear so completely.

After that, whenever anyone asked why I looked broken, why I stayed quiet, why something in me felt absent, I told the same story.

That my girlfriend had died.

I even built small details around it — not to deceive people, but to avoid questions I didn’t have the strength to answer.

In some strange way, it felt true.

Because what I had lost wasn’t just a relationship.
It was a future I had already learned how to live inside.

And mourning that kind of loss doesn’t come with rituals.
Only silence.

There were still three or four days left before my flight.

I wasn’t counting them deliberately, but time had started pressing in on me anyway.

One night, my phone lit up with a notification from Truecaller.
Her name.

She was trying to call.

It was late. I didn't answer.
Instead, I told my father.

He didn't hesitate.
He told me not to talk to her.

The next day, the same notification came again.
And again.
Multiple times.

Each time my phone buzzed, something inside my chest tightened.
Not hope.
Not relief.
Just disturbance.

After class, I gave in.

I unblocked her on WhatsApp and asked,
"What is it?"

She replied almost immediately.
"Nothing. Block me again."

So I did.

The next day, it happened again.

Another call.
Another pull.

This time, when I unblocked her, she didn't pretend it was nothing.

She apologized.
Then she video-called.

I picked up.

Her face filled the screen, and before she even spoke, I saw it —
tears sitting in her eyes, spilling without control.

She was crying.
Asking me to come back.
Saying she couldn't live without me.
Promising she wouldn't argue anymore.
Promising everything people promise when they're afraid of losing the last thread.

I listened.

I was already broken, and hearing her like that didn't heal me.
It only split me further.

I told her I needed to ask my father.

When I did, he didn't soften his words.

He told me she would break me again.
That she didn't deserve another chance.
That this cycle would only repeat.

Then he told me exactly what to say.

"Tell her my father is against this decision, and I can't go against my father."

I repeated those words to her.

She begged me to ask him again.
To request him.
To try.

The next day, she messaged me first.

She said,
"No need to ask your father. Do as your father is saying."

I didn't know whether that was strength or surrender.

I told her I was going home and that from now on, she shouldn't try to contact me anymore and blocked her.

I was shattered — but the truth was uglier than sadness.

I still had feelings for her.
But now my family was against the relationship.

And that changed everything.

By then, everyone in my family knew about Shasi and me.
That knowledge sat on my shoulders like weight. I wasn't just heartbroken anymore — I was nervous.

I didn't know how I would face them.
How I would walk into my own house carrying a story that had already spread without my permission.

Then the day came.

I took the flight.

When I walked out of the airport and saw my father waiting for me, something loosened inside my chest.
I smiled without forcing it.
For the first time in days, I felt grounded.

On the way home, while sitting in the car, my phone vibrated again.

A new Instagram account.

It was her.

She asked if I had reached home safely.

I told her I was in the car.

Then she asked if I had talked to my father.

I told her I had just met him and needed some time.

She said okay.

Then she added something else — that Utsav's follow request had come again, so she was deactivating that account.

I stared at the screen.

I couldn't understand the sequence anymore.

First she asked me to convince my father.
Then she told me not to.
Now she was asking again.

My mind was exhausted.

I wasn't angry in a loud way.
I was confused in a way that makes you feel trapped inside your own thoughts.

I didn't know what to do.

Let her go —
or keep trying to fix something that kept breaking the same way every time.

And that question stayed with me longer than any call ever did.

The days that followed didn't move forward.
They looped.

We stayed in contact — not properly, not peacefully.
Mostly, she contacted me.

She would ask the same question again and again.
Had I talked to my family?
Had I convinced them?

And then, without warning, her tone would change.

She would say she didn't love me anymore.
That there was no need to ask anyone.
That we should just end everything.

And then the cycle would restart.

Hope.
Withdrawal.
Distance.
Return.

I told my mumma about it.

I didn't dramatize it. I just explained the pattern.
She listened quietly and then asked me something I hadn't expected.

"Does she have some mental condition?" she asked.
"Because this isn't normal. This will only keep hurting you."

She told me not to open her messages anymore.
Not out of anger — out of concern.

"She will only hurt you," she said.

Around that time, my grandma told me something that shook me.

She said the day I told my father about Shasi, he had told her everything too.
She had known from the beginning.

That meant something else too — something heavier.

When I went to meet Shasi in December, my entire family already knew about her.
And my grandma wasn't fully happy with the relationship.
She had even told my father not to let us meet.

But my father still allowed it.

For my happiness.

That realization stayed with me.

The next week, I stopped talking to Shasi and returned to the hostel.
I tried to resume normal life. Classes. Routine. Silence.

Four or five days later, Holi holidays started.
I came back home again.

And everything repeated.

She started contacting me again.
The same questions.

The same uncertainty.
The same emotional pulling back and forth.

This time, I told my father everything.

He didn't argue with me.
He didn't scold me.

He showed me something instead.

A screenshot.

From the day I had broken down.
The day I was crying uncontrollably.

He looked at me and said quietly,
"You may forget this day. But I can't."

That was the moment I understood something clearly.

I had my answer.

The chapter of Shasi needed to end.

But feelings don't disappear just because answers arrive.

So I still called her.

She spoke normally.
Too normally.

Listening to her voice, it felt like she was fine.
Light. Comfortable. Almost carefree.

She didn't sound like someone trying to hold on.
She sounded like someone who had already moved forward.

At moments, I felt like someone else was there too.
Listening.
Present.

When I asked her to come back into the relationship, she said no — casually.
Without hesitation.
Without weight.

She told me she didn't love me anymore.

She said we could still be friends, which I didn't wanted.

My father had strictly told me not to talk to her again.
But I was still talking.

And slowly, I realized something that hurt more than rejection.

It felt like she was making fun of me.

Not openly.
Not cruelly.

But in the way indifference laughs without sound.

My heartbeat started racing again.
That familiar anxiety returned.

I went up to the roof of my house.

Alone.

And there, under the open sky, I sent her voice messages.

Not begging.
Not accusing.

I told her why I didn't want to be with her anymore.
I told her about my family — how supportive they were, how grateful I was to have them.
I told her that it was good we weren't married.
That some endings save you from worse futures.

I wasn't trying to convince her.

I was convincing myself.

Because loving someone who no longer takes you seriously doesn't just break your heart —
it breaks your dignity.

And that night, standing on the roof, with my chest still tight and my voice shaking, I finally understood something painful but necessary:

Some people don't leave loudly.
They stay just long enough to watch you fall apart —
and then walk away untouched.

That's where I stopped trying.

Not because I stopped feeling.

But because I finally chose not to bleed where no one was holding the wound anymore.

It was March.
Holi had just passed.

In two days, I had to return to the hostel.
And the very next day after that, my exams were starting.

That detail mattered more than it should have.

Because for the first time, I wasn't thinking about the syllabus or revision.
I was thinking about something smaller — and much sadder.

Who would wish me *all the best* before the exam now?

That thought arrived quietly, but it stayed.
It felt childish to care about it, yet impossible not to.
Because for a long time, that wish had come from one place.
And now that place was empty.

My mumma and daddy noticed.

They didn't say much.
They just stepped in — naturally, without announcement — filling the space I didn't know how to ask for.
That alone kept me from breaking completely.

The day after Holi, something changed in my body.

My heartbeat wouldn't settle.
It wasn't fast because of fear.
It was fast without reason.

A constant, painful thudding in my chest, like my heart was trying to outrun something invisible.
I couldn't calm myself down. Breathing didn't help. Distraction didn't help.

My father looked at me for a long moment and said I should visit the doctor.

I went.

The doctor asked me questions —
how I felt,
how long it had been happening,
what my days and nights looked like now.

I told him the truth.

That I hadn't slept properly since around mid-February.
That nights stretched endlessly.
That even when I lay down, my mind refused to rest.

After listening carefully, he said something I hadn't allowed myself to say yet.

He told me these were signs of depression.
That I was slipping into it.

He said I was overthinking constantly, and that overthinking doesn't stay in the mind forever —
it starts affecting the body.

He asked me to get an ECG done to check my heart rhythm.

The scans came back.

Nothing was structurally wrong with my heart.
And yet, everything felt wrong.

He gave me ten tablets.

He was very clear about them.

He told me to take only one, and only when the heartbeat became uncontrollable —
when I felt like I might lose myself.

He warned me not to take them frequently.
Not to rely on them.
Because if my body got used to them and I couldn't get them again on time, the consequences could be dangerous.

That warning stayed with me.

I wasn't scared of the tablets.
I was scared that I needed them at all.

After that, I returned to the hostel.

From the next day, my internal exams began.

Life didn't slow down.
It never does.

We were preparing for exams.

My first internal exam was Mathematics, scheduled for the afternoon.
That morning, I sat with my PDFs open, trying to study — but nothing was entering my head. Numbers blurred. Concepts felt distant. I was bored, restless, exhausted.

That's when I saw the notification.

Utsav.

A follow request.

I stared at it for a long time.

Then I did something I hadn't planned —
Allowed him to message me.

Not out of curiosity.
Out of exhaustion.

I messaged first.

Then he asked.

“You guys broke up?”

I asked him why he wanted to know.

He replied that he had only ever tried to save me. That from the beginning he had warned me — that Shasi was a cheater, characterless, not trustworthy.

Something inside me hardened.

I replied calmly.

“And what about you?”
“You were blackmailing her. Forcing her to get physical.”

There was a pause.

Then he stopped pretending.

He told me they already had.

That they had been physical.
Not once.
Repeatedly.

He said they used to go weekly.

My hands went cold.

I asked him how I was supposed to believe him.

He told me to ask Shasi about one thing —
the room at TSP Café.

That name landed like a strike.

I opened her new Instagram account and messaged her.

Before answering my question, she asked something else.

“Who told you to talk to Utsav?”

I told her the truth.
That it was my decision.

Then I asked her directly.

Whether it was true.
Whether they had been physical.

Her reply was short.

“Hmm.”

Nothing else.

No explanation.
No defense.

Just confirmation.

Utsav then sent me photos.
And videos.

Private moments.

Things that were never meant to be seen by anyone else.

I didn’t saw all of them.
I didn’t need to.

My heartbeat exploded.

That same violent, uncontrollable racing.
My chest tightened. My vision blurred.

I took the medicine.

Even then, he didn’t stop.

There was one more thing Utsav told me.

I hadn’t asked for it.
But once the door was open, truth kept walking in.

He told me the reason they finally broke apart.

According to him, she had gone on a trip with her family. During that time, she shared her private pictures with her cousin. Not accidentally. Not unknowingly.

She had developed feelings for him.

That sentence hit differently.

Not like anger.
Not like jealousy.

Like disbelief.

Utsav said that when he found out, he said harsh things to her. Words meant to wound, not correct. From that point on, whatever fragile thing they had left began to rot. That was where they truly started falling apart.

And then came the final blow.

Utsav told all of this to her mother.

I sat with that information for a long time.

Not reacting.
Not responding.

Just letting it settle.

Because suddenly, many things made sense.

The fear.
The panic.
The constant control.
The shifting stories.
The terror of authority.

It didn't excuse what she had done to me.
But it explained the chaos she carried.

And for the first time, I didn't feel the urge to fix anything.

I felt finished.

Not angry-finished.
Not revenge-finished.

Just done.

Some truths don't ask you to respond.
They ask you to walk away before you become part of the damage.

That was one of them.

Utsav kept asking me for her new number.
I refused.

Not to protect myself —
but because I knew what he would do to her.

He would destroy her life.

When he didn't believe me, I told him I had deleted everything about her from my phone.

He still didn't trust me.

In the end, to make him leave, I gave him her new Instagram ID.

And then I left for my exam.

My legs were shaking while walking.
Not metaphorically — physically.

When I sat in the exam hall, my entire body trembled.
Hands. Chest. Breath.

I started writing.

Halfway through, my mind went blank.

The paper was in front of me, but I couldn't see it.

I put my head down.

And in that silence, I remembered my father.
My mother.
Their faith.
Their sacrifices.
Their quiet belief in me.

I lifted my head.

And I started writing again.

Not perfectly.
Not calmly.

But honestly.

When the results came, I had scored **47.5 out of 50**.

All my exams went well.

And that's when something finally settled inside me.

The balance I thought she gave me in my life —
was never hers to give.

She wasn't writing my exams.
She wasn't carrying my future.
She wasn't holding me together.

I was.

I always had been.

When my exams ended, the noise didn't stop.

It just changed shape.

I contacted Priya.

I told her simply that Shasi and I had broken up.

She was shocked.

Not the kind of shock people perform —
the quiet kind, where someone stops typing for a moment because they don't know where to begin.

I told her everything.

And then she told me things I hadn't known.

Before Utsav, Shasi had kissed Diyansh.
They weren't just friends.

She also told me that Shasi had gone with boys on bikes to the airport interview — something I had been told never happened.

And the things Shasi had said about Priya and her boyfriend —
that they were inappropriate, careless, immoral —
were completely false.

Those weren't misunderstandings.

They were lies.

One by one, the stories I had believed collapsed.
Not loudly.
Just completely.

Those truths didn't heal me instantly.
But they gave me something I hadn't had before.

Permission to move on.

Still, I needed time.

Her absence felt physical.
Like a hollow space inside my chest that refused to close.

I felt unbearably lonely.

So I started spending time in my classmates' rooms in the hostel.
Sitting with them. Talking. Laughing when required. Staying late even when I wanted to be alone.

Anything to not return to silence too soon.

But my body didn't forget.

The heartbeat episodes continued.
Sudden. Unpredictable. Draining.

Even when my mind understood, my nervous system hadn't caught up yet.

In between all this, Shasi kept trying to contact me.

In May, she found another way.

She created a WhatsApp group.
Added only me.
And messaged.

She said Utsav was spreading her private photos.
That he was talking about her character in her extended family.
That it was happening because I had given him her new username.

I read it.

And something in me finally shut.

I replied once —not calmly.

I told them her to stay away from my life.

Then I left the group.

My body started shaking violently.

Not fear.
Not guilt.

Exhaustion.

I had tolerated too many interruptions by then.
Too many emotional emergencies that were no longer mine to solve.

I called my grandma.

She listened.
She didn't rush to advise.
She just grounded me — the way elders do when words fail.

The next day, something important happened.

It was Grandma's decision and so Aryan's mother, Naveen bhaiya, and I were on a conference call.
I told them she was still messaging me.

They took it seriously.

They spoke directly to Shasi's mother.

And her mother assured them that Shasi would not contact me again.

That assurance mattered more than any apology ever could.

Because for the first time in months,
the boundary didn't come from me alone.

It was enforced.

And when that happened, I felt something unfamiliar.

Not happiness.
Not relief.

Space.

Enough space to finally focus on my life
without waiting for the next message
or the next explanation
or the next collapse.

That's when I understood something quietly important:

Moving on didn't begin when the truth came out.

It began when the interruptions stopped.

It was May again.

Anna came back into my life briefly — conversations reopened, familiar names resurfaced — but none of it stayed.

Anna later told me that even when she pretended she didn't want a relationship, she actually wanted me to chase her. She wanted to see effort from me. When Shasi returned and I started moving toward her, it hurt Anna, and that's why she asked me to block her.

After a few months, I stopped talking to Anna. To Abhi. To Manav.

Because of a conflict that I don't want to mention.
Because this story was never about them.

This arc and book is always about me and Shasi.

Everything else was distraction.

On **25 May**, I returned home.

The same date.

Last year, on this day, I had been happy because I was going to meet her.
This year, I was happy because I was coming back home.

That contrast didn't hurt.

It healed.

Not dramatically.
Not completely.

Just enough.

It felt like something inside me finally accepted that the page had turned — not because I forced it to, but because it was tired of being reread.

During the summer break, I thought about counseling.
About seeing a psychiatrist.

But I already knew what I would be told.
To accept.
To breathe.
To move on.

So instead, I chose something harder.

I faced it myself.

I lived with the anxiety instead of running from it.
I sat with the fear instead of numbing it.
I forced myself to do things that were supposed to make me happy — even when happiness felt artificial at first.

Slowly, it stopped feeling forced.

I told a few close friends the truth.
That my girlfriend hadn't died in an accident.
That we had broken up.

They didn't step back.
They didn't judge.

They stayed.

That mattered more than reassurance ever could.

Even now, I carried some things forward from Shasi — not memories, but habits.

She once told me to save **₹100 at the end of every month**.
For emergencies.
For responsibility.

I still do it.

Not because of her.
But because discipline outlives emotion.

At the beginning of May, I hated her.
As time passed, that hate softened.

Eventually, it disappeared.

What remained was neutrality.

At home, I spoke harshly at times.
I said things about relationships. About girls. About marriage.

That if I didn't find the right person, I would still be fine.
That what I saw around me in college didn't inspire dreams anymore.

I even told my father things I believed then — rigid things, shaped by hurt.

He didn't argue.

He explained.

He told me I couldn't control anyone's past.
That if something is revealed after marriage, acceptance is part of commitment too.
And that it was better the truth about Shasi came out now — before life tied us together permanently.

I had already told my parents everything I had learned.
What Priya had said.
What Utsav had revealed.

They listened.

I didn't react much anymore.

Because by then, reaction had exhausted itself.

One day around the time of Holi, my father told me something important.

He reminded me of the time he had warned me not to give Shasi a commitment for marriage.

He said he hadn't said it randomly.

Jaya aunty had asked him to.
She had understood the nature of the industry Shasi was entering — where she would meet new people every day, new men constantly, new attention endlessly.

She had anticipated a day like this.

And my father had warned me — not to control her, not to insult her — but to protect me.

That realization didn't make me angry.

It made me quiet.

Because for the first time, I understood that some warnings aren't about mistrust.

They're about foresight.

And that summer, without announcements or declarations, something finally settled.

I wasn't healed.

But I was no longer bleeding.

And that was enough to begin the next chapter of my life —
not as someone running from the past,
but as someone who had survived it without losing himself.

After that, time kept moving.

Months passed.
Seasons changed.
Life slowly found new routines.

But **14th February** didn't change.

For the world, it became a day of celebration.
Photos. Flowers. Messages filled with red hearts and promises.

For me, it became something else.

A date I didn't look forward to.
A date I didn't announce.
A date I carried silently.

Because that was the day my love life didn't just end —
it shattered.

Not in front of people.
Not with shouting or drama.

But quietly, in a way that stays longer.

I don't hate the day.
I don't curse it.

I just remember.

And maybe that's enough.

Some dates are not meant to be celebrated.
They are meant to be understood.

And 14th February became mine.

Chapter 19: Echoes That Wouldn’t Fade

Description: *Even after endings, some voices return. This chapter explores memory, repetition, and the emotional pull of the past — and how growth sometimes begins by refusing to answer one last call.*

In early June, there was an engagement function in Harraiya.
I went with my family.

When I got out of the car, I saw the hotel.

For a moment, something tightened inside me.

I wondered — was this the same place where we had seen each other for the first time?

I wasn’t sure.

But when I went inside and walked around, recognition arrived slowly and then all at once.

It was the same hotel.
Hotel Krinoscco.

My body reacted before my mind could catch up.

The same walls.
The same spaces.
The same kind of gathering.

The relatives were familiar again — faces I had already lived through once.
Only this time, she wasn’t there.

Neither was her family.

That absence should have been a relief.
Instead, it made everything louder.

I sat alone for a while, trying to stay composed.

Anika noticed and asked me quietly if I was feeling FOMO.

I didn’t hesitate.

I told her I was feeling PTSD.

There was no drama in saying it.
Just honesty.

Some places don’t hurt because of who is present —
they hurt because of who *isn’t*.

I stayed.
I endured it.
And somehow, I made it through.

I was fighting battles inside myself.

I didn't know what she was doing anymore, where her life had gone, or whether I even mattered in it now. Those questions stayed with me longer than they should have. They disturbed me deeply. Still, every day, I tried to figure out one simple thing — how to survive.

That phase stripped me down quietly.

If there is one thing I am grateful for during that time, it is my family and the few friends who stayed. They didn't fix me. They didn't rush me. They just stood there, steady, while I struggled to hold myself together.

That summer, I didn't go anywhere.

No trips.
No escapes.

I stayed back and focused on repairing what had broken inside me. Not healing — just rehabilitation. Learning how to breathe again without panic. Learning how to sit with my thoughts without collapsing. Learning how to exist without needing explanations.

As July arrived, time started nudging me forward again.

The beginning of my fifth semester was getting closer. Deadlines, routines, responsibilities — all waiting patiently for me to return. By the end of July, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Readiness.

Not complete.
Not confident.

But real.

My condition had improved — not suddenly, not magically — but enough to take the next step. Enough to leave home again. Enough to believe that I could carry what I had been through without it crushing me.

And for the first time in months, that felt like progress.

Standing there, something else surfaced in my mind.

I remembered the things she used to say.
That once we reached the legal age, we would do a court marriage.
That we wouldn't need approval, permission, or patience — just courage.

At the time, those words had sounded like certainty.
Like commitment.

Now, looking back, I understood them differently.

They weren't plans.
They were fantasies.

Things spoken in moments of closeness, not built to survive reality. Promises shaped by emotion, not responsibility.

And realizing that didn't hurt the way truth usually does.

It clarified.

Because some people don't lie intentionally —
they just speak from the version of themselves that exists only in imagination.

Another thought kept returning to me.

That maybe everything had begun much earlier than I wanted to admit.
At that one party.

The night I hadn't been fully willing to attend.
The night she later told me she hadn't wanted to attend either — yet still came.

We both showed up despite resistance.
Despite instincts whispering no.

And there was that one photograph.

A moment where Naveen bhaiya had asked me to join the frame.
It felt harmless then. Almost forgettable.

Now it didn't.

Looking back, it felt like a door opening quietly — not loudly enough to notice, but wide enough for everything that followed to pass through.

Nothing collapsed in a single moment.
It unfolded.

From one decision ignored.
One discomfort dismissed.
One picture that seemed insignificant at the time.

And realizing that didn't fill me with regret.

It gave me understanding.

Because some stories don't begin with love or betrayal —
they begin when we ignore the first unease and call it adjustment.

By the end of July, I returned to the hostel.

A new semester began.

From the outside, it looked like a restart. Classes, corridors, routines falling back into place. But some absences only reveal themselves in motion.

Whenever I traveled alone by train, I felt it the most.

The journeys felt longer now. Quieter. Boring in a way that wasn't about scenery or time. I missed having someone on the other end of the phone. I missed the constant connection — the way we used to stay linked through almost the entire day. Messages, calls, shared silences. That background presence that makes loneliness forgettable.

After Shasi left, I didn't just miss *her*.
I missed what partnership feels like.

The comfort.
The attention.
The feeling that someone knows where you are without asking.

Still, the truths that had surfaced helped me move forward. Not quickly, not easily — but steadily. Every truth removed another illusion. And without illusion, attachment slowly loosens its grip.

I started the semester with new energy — fragile, but real. I wasn't fully healed, but I was recovering. That had to be enough.

August arrived.

My birthday came.

Somewhere inside me, there was a quiet expectation. Not hope — just habit. Exes often wish. At least once. At least formally.

She didn't.

No message.
No gesture.
Nothing.

I told myself she had moved on.

And strangely, that thought didn't hurt the way I expected it to.

It just made the day feel empty.

It was probably the most boring birthday I had ever had. Not sad. Not memorable. Just flat. And maybe that itself was a sign of progress — because once, absence would have broken me. That day, it simply existed.

September passed too.

Her birthday came and went.

I didn’t reach out.
And nothing came back to me either.

October arrived.

And something happened.

It started with a missed call.

Four or five seconds.
Just enough to be noticed.
Not enough to demand attention.

It was her.

I didn’t answer.
I let it fade the way unanswered things are supposed to.

A little later, a message arrived on Messages app.

She asked me not to tell my parents that she had contacted me.
She said she just wanted to talk — once.
Only once.

And then she used my name.

Not the one written on records.
The one she used to call me.

“Krishu.”

That single word reached further than the call ever could.

Not because it meant something new —
but because it belonged to a version of me that no longer existed.

She kept saying she only wanted to talk.
That she needed it.

I sat with the phone in my hand for a long time.

I wasn’t excited.
I wasn’t hopeful.

I was aware.

Aware of how easily familiarity disguises itself as importance.
Aware of how the past tries to sound gentle when it wants entry.

Still, I unblocked her on Instagram.

Not because I was ready to return —
but because I wanted to hear what the past sounded like
after I had already learned how to live without it.

She told me she couldn't forget me.

That she hadn't been able to move on.
That everywhere she went, everything she saw or heard, reminded her of us — of the memories we had made together.

She told me she had left home.
That she was now in Patna, working at the airport there. She thought distance would help her heal. She thought a new city would erase old feelings.

It hadn't.

She asked for a video call.

I said no at first.
I wasn't ready to see her.
I wasn't ready to see what familiarity might do to me.

But after some time, I agreed.

The screen lit up.

I saw her.
She saw me.

We smiled — instinctively, without thinking. The kind of smile that arrives before the mind can stop it.

When we talked, she asked me to come back.
To return.

I told her it wasn't possible anymore.
That my parents would never allow it.

She asked me to try.
To request my father.

I couldn't.

If my parents found out I was still talking to her, they would think I wasn't loyal to them. And I wasn't willing to break their trust for something that already stood on fragile ground.

So I gave her a condition.

If she could talk to my father herself — if she could request him, explain everything — then I would continue.

She couldn't.

Not on call.
Not in person.
Not at all.

So we stayed where we were — talking, but not moving.

She also showed me the new and more cuts that she made on her hands.

I was not happy after seeing this.

She asked me something quietly.

“Do you still love me?”

I replied without thinking.

“Then why would I still be talking to you?”

The question didn’t end anything.
It only paused it.

Later, she asked again — properly this time.

I told her the truth.

That I needed time.
Not to decide about her —
but to ask myself whether what I felt was love, or just memory refusing to leave.

One day, while we were talking, a name came up.

Priya.

Shasi mentioned that she had seen her when she went to college to give an exam. That Priya had noticed her — but didn’t talk.

I listened and said calmly, without hesitation,
“She won’t talk to you anymore.”

There was no argument.
No question.

She just replied,
“Hmm.” Because I already told Shasi that after break up, I was talking with Priya for a while and currently we just send funny reels to each other.

That single word carried acceptance.

Not surprise.
Not regret.

Just acknowledgment.

And in that moment, I understood something clearly.

Some bridges don't burn.
They simply stop being crossed.

And once that happens, even silence feels settled.

I also showed her the Minecraft world I had created after everything ended. She was amazed to see how much I had built on my own.

For two or three days, we talked normally.
But even that felt different.

She wasn't as present as she used to be.
When I asked her why, she said she was trying to keep herself under control.

She told me she planned to transfer her job to Delhi.
That if she did, maybe sometimes we could meet.

I don't know why, but I felt myself drifting toward a sentence I shouldn't say.

Before saying it, I warned her.

"I think I'm about to make a mistake."

She replied immediately.

"Yes. You will."

That answer didn't hurt me.

It clarified me.

So instead of saying what I was about to say, I chose something else.

I told her maybe it was better if we ended this properly — with a happy ending.

Not a reunion.
Not a promise.

Just peace.

I kissed her forehead through the screen.
A gesture without demand.
Without future.

She asked me not to remove her from my followers.

I wasn't following her anyway.

And just like that, she moved to a corner of my life.

Not erased.
Not invited back.

Just placed where memories belong when they no longer have permission to decide your future.

I don't know why she re-entered my life again.

It was around Diwali.

This time, something in me chose a different response.
Not confrontation.
Not explanation.

Visibility.

I started posting Instagram stories.
Pictures where I looked happy.
Well dressed.
Out with people.
Doing things without hesitation — almost reckless.

Not because I was trying to lie.

But because I wanted her to see that I was still standing.

On Diwali, we wished each other.

Nothing more than that.

She asked how I was.

I replied — not unkindly, but clearly — that I didn't want to talk anymore. That if she wanted to stay connected, she could follow me. But there would be no chatting. No drifting into friendship. No reopening doors under the excuse of festivals.

I wasn't trying to be cold.

I was protecting the line I had finally learned to draw.

Some relationships don't end because of hatred.
They end because continuation would undo the progress made in silence.

And that Diwali, for the first time, I chose distance without anger —
and boundaries without guilt.

For a moment, I wondered if I was doing something wrong.
If happiness, when displayed, becomes cruelty.

I posted a photo on instagram story with my cousin.

And then I saw it.

She unfollowed me.

I didn’t know how to react.

There was no message.
No goodbye.

Just absence.

And somehow, that felt heavier than any argument we had ever had.

She left.

Not dramatically.
Not painfully.

Just… stepped out.

Later — on **30th October**, in the evening — she messaged me again.

She said she was coming to Delhi to submit some documents at the airport. That she would leave the next day. She wanted to meet.

She didn’t insisted.
She asked gently.

The timing was unforgiving.

The next day, I had my Computer Networks practical exam.

I told her I couldn’t meet.
That this time, it wasn’t possible.

Not because I didn’t feel anything.
But because some priorities had finally stopped negotiating.

And for the first time, choosing myself didn’t feel like loss.

It felt like alignment.

We didn’t meet that time.

And that mattered more than either of us admitted.

Because sometimes closure doesn’t come from one last conversation.

It comes from choosing not to pause your life
for something that already had its chance to stay.

It was Shasi's first time traveling by flight. After she landed at IGI Airport, she got confused and asked for help, trying to find the metro station at the terminal 2. She video-called me. I didn't know much either, except about Terminal 3. We searched together on the call and on Google Maps, but in the end she took a cab and went to her friend Meena's room. The next day, she stayed in touch, updating me that she was there, that her document work was done, that she was leaving, and later that she had reached Patna. After that we didn't talked.

On **November 4**, I don't know why, but I messaged her again.

It was in between my exam days. My mind was already tired, already stretched thin. I asked her for a video call. She agreed.

We were on call.

It felt… neutral.

Too neutral.

I was speaking.
She was listening.
Replying only when needed.

Not engaged.
Not distant.

Just present enough to not disappear.

I noticed it. I asked her about it.

She told me that from now she will try to move on.

The way she said it felt strange. Forced. Unfamiliar. I don't even remember everything we talked about after that. The conversation blurred about unsure meeting, and that itself triggered something inside me.

I ended it sharply.

I told her not to message or contact me again.
That it was good she was trying to move on.
That I hoped she actually would.

I also apologized to her for the private photos we shared. Even if Shasi had started it, I allowed myself to get pulled into it. With time, I regretted it, because it felt like I had compromised her dignity.

Before ending the call, I asked for something familiar.

Her forehead.

It was something she used to do instinctively — without thinking, without hesitation. But this time, she didn't bring her forehead closer to the phone. She stayed where she was.

That pause said more than words.

So I said it out loud.

That it was really over.

Only then did she move closer, only then did she bring her forehead toward the screen — like realization arriving a moment too late.

I didn't wait.

I ended the video call.

Because some gestures lose meaning when they come after certainty instead of before it.

Then I blocked her.

We stopped talking again.

But deep down, I knew something I didn't want to admit.

Every time we stopped, I still felt we would talk again.

That feeling never left.

In early December, my semester exams ended. I stayed back in the hostel for a few days because my bua was coming from Australia, and my grandma had come to Delhi from home. We went together to receive bua, and from there, bua and grandma were leaving for a trip to Turkey.

That evening, I took bua to **Karim's** for dinner.

On the way, I told her everything.

Not pieces.
Not edited versions.

Everything.

Bua was wise — the kind of person everyone listens to in my family. Almost like the Supreme Court of our house. She listened quietly and then said something simple.

That there had been a communication gap.
That we should have talked more clearly. Not argued — but sorted things calmly.

And then she said something else.

That it was over now.
And I shouldn't look back.

In the future, I should just be careful. Learn. Protect myself.

After that night, I went back home. Bua and grandma left for Turkey.

Another year was ending.

Since 2022, I had a strange streak — every year, at least one trip to a hill station.
In 2025, I hadn't gone anywhere.

And honestly, 2025 hadn't started well.

But at the very end of December, I went to **Manali** and **Rohtang Pass** with my family.

The streak didn't break.

And somehow, the year ended on a high note.

The New Year came.

A few days later, my **6th semester** was about to start. I took three days of leave, then returned to the hostel and resumed college life.

By mid-January **2026**, things felt stable again.

Then one day, my phone lit up.

A notification.

A call from a blocked number —
intercepted.

Twice.

And that's where this chapter ends.

Not with closure.
But with the past reminding me that it hadn't finished knocking yet.

Chapter 20: The Last Time We Talked

Description: *Some endings do not come with silence. They come with words spoken one final time. This chapter traces the closing exchange between two people whose story began with hope and ended with understanding, marking the moment when everything that needed to be said was finally said.*

When I saw the notification about a blocked number being intercepted, I already knew it was her.
Still, I checked on Truecaller — and it confirmed it.

It was Shasi.

For a moment, I thought she might want to say something important. Something unfinished. So I unblocked her on Instagram and sent a short message:

“Yes. Say.”

She replied quickly and asked where I was — at home or at the hostel.
I told her I was in the hostel.

Then she asked whether I had classes on Saturday and Sunday.
I told her there was a holiday.

After that, she asked if we could meet on Saturday or Sunday.

It was Thursday when she messaged me.

I told her we could meet on Saturday.

She replied that it was fine whenever I said.

I asked her one more thing — whether she was in Delhi.

She said yes.

Then she asked where we should meet.

I asked her for the nearest metro to her place.

She said Chattarpur, on the Yellow Line.

I told her we could meet first at Rajiv Chowk. From there, we could decide where to go.

She said she would first need to confirm whether the coming weekend was off for her or not.

At that time, she was at the airport.

After that conversation, I slept for a while.

When I woke up, I saw her message asking for a video call. We connected. We saw each other again and smiled — naturally, without effort.

But the call kept breaking.

During her working hours, interruptions were unavoidable. Sometimes it was immigration. Sometimes arrivals or departures. Voices in the background. Announcements cutting through sentences. Moments where she had to pause, leave the frame, and come back.

So we didn't really talk properly then.

Later, when she returned to her room, we finally had a clear video call.

No interruptions.
No background noise.

Just the two of us on screen again.

She asked again, half-joking, half-afraid,
"So… you don't miss me?"

I told her the truth.

That I did miss her.
But that she had said she wanted to move on — and I didn't think it was right to interrupt someone's life when they were trying to do that. I said I would explain everything properly on the call.

When we spoke on video, I told her clearly.

That I missed her.
That I still had feelings.
But that ethics mattered to me now. That holding someone back, even with love, wasn't fair if they were trying to move forward.

She broke down.

She said she couldn't live without me.
That she couldn't move on.

She mentioned the marks on her hands — reminders of a phase she hadn't fully escaped.

I asked her then, quietly, why we were still apart.

She reminded me of the condition I had placed — that she would need to speak to my parents directly. Something she still couldn't bring herself to do.

She also told me something else.

That she couldn't become an air hostess anymore.
Because of the marks.

Her friend Meena had joined cabin crew and had encouraged her to try as well, but she said it wasn't possible for her now.

I asked if she still planned to pursue it.

She said no.

I didn't say it out loud.

Inside, I felt relief.

Because I had seen and heard too much about that industry — cases, stories, reels — where it was revealed that air hostesses are often pressured by pilots, and how refusing can make their professional life unbearable. The constant rumors, trolling, and experiences shared online had already filled my mind with fear.

I knew myself well enough to accept one thing honestly:
I wasn't strong enough to handle that level of insecurity again.

So when she said she couldn't become an air hostess, I felt relieved — not out of cruelty, but out of exhaustion. I simply didn't have the mental capacity to carry more doubt, fear, and imagination.

That relief came from self-preservation, not judgment.

She told me that her holiday for the weekend had been approved.

I felt excited — genuinely happy — because it meant we would finally meet. She didn't express it the same way, but she showed happiness in her own restrained manner.

That night, we slept after wishing each other good night.

The next morning, she told me she was still feeling weak. She also mentioned pain in her chest. I asked her to consult a doctor, especially for the pain, because I was worried it could be something serious like breast cancer.

She replied casually — almost disturbingly so — saying that maybe it would be better if it was something serious, at least then she would be free from what she called her hell-like life.

That response stayed with me.

During our conversation, she said that one day she would leave everything behind and go somewhere far away.

I asked her quietly,
"Will you leave me too?"

She replied with a single word.
"Everything."

That answer stayed with me.

Once, this was the same girl who wanted to leave everything and come to me. Now, she was ready to leave me as well — as if it no longer mattered.

She told me there were a few things she had once dreamed of achieving in her life, things that had meant everything to her at one point. Now, she believed those dreams could never be fulfilled. And because of that, she felt there was no meaning left in doing anything at all.

It was still morning.

I asked her not to start the day with such thoughts. I told her to stop talking negatively so early, before the day had even begun.

Then we both got ready for our routines —
she for her job,
and I for college.

Life moved forward, even while her words lingered behind.

Later that day, I asked her to confirm whether we were meeting the next day.

She refused.

Slowly, excuses started appearing.
That she had work.
That she needed to wash her clothes.
That she was still feeling weak.

None of it made sense to me. Washing clothes doesn't take that long. And if she was still that weak, how was she managing her job?

This was the same girl who had always been desperate to meet me.
Now she was avoiding it.

When I asked if it was because of her periods, she said yes. But it was already the fourth or fifth day — a time when, from what I remembered, she didn't suffer much pain.

Still, she refused.

I requested her repeatedly.
I wanted to meet on Saturday because it genuinely made sense for me. Sunday I will only get proper rest day and I don't want to go anywhere on Sundays. The semester had just started, so the initial days were light, but I knew that once time passed, my schedule would only get busier.

Instead of agreeing, she said something else.

She told me that whenever she felt like meeting, she would come directly to my college gate.

I refused immediately.

I told her that if she came to the gate, I wouldn't come out to meet her.

She asked why.

After she kept forcing the question, I finally told her the truth.

That most people around me believed she had died in an accident. If they saw her, I would be questioned about why I had lied. And even if someone didn't recognize her, they would assume that after coming out of depression, I had gone back to another girl — something I didn't want to deal with, hear about, or explain.

That conversation made one thing painfully clear.

She wanted control over the meeting.
I wanted clarity.

And those two things were no longer compatible.

Saturday didn't become a meeting day after all.

We woke up late. I did my work. She did hers.

Around the afternoon, she called me again.

She was crying continuously. Not softly — deeply, uncontrollably. When I asked her what had happened, she couldn't speak properly. Her words kept breaking, and most of the time there were only sobs on the other end.

After a while, she managed to say that she was feeling scared. That her mind was filled with negativity and she couldn't control it.

I stayed on the call. I spoke slowly. I tried to steady her breathing, to calm her down, to bring her back into the moment. Gradually, the crying reduced.

After some time, she said she was okay enough to return to work.

And just like that, the call ended — leaving me exhausted, carrying emotions that weren't even mine to resolve.

Surprisingly, she finished everything early and asked if we could play **Minecraft** together.

I tried to recover the private server we used to play on earlier, but it wouldn't load properly. After a few failed attempts, I created a new world and invited her through the friends list. We played for a while — quietly, almost carefully — and then shifted to a voice call.

That's when she told me something serious.

She said that in about two years, her father planned to get her married. A boy had already been selected. She had heard this from her younger sister.

I asked her if she would ever talk about me to her father.

She nodded and said she would try — at least once. But she also admitted that it would be difficult at my home.

Trying to lighten the moment, I joked that if we didn't marry each other, we'd make our kids marry someday.

She agreed, smiling.

We drifted into lighter talk. I told her to collect autographs if she ever saw the Indian cricket team, especially during the upcoming 2026 T20 world cup. I named a few players — Abhishek Sharma and Hardik Pandya — and she strictly said that she didn't like Hardik because of past controversies [with his ex-wife].

Later, I asked again if we could meet on Sunday.

She refused and asked me not to force her.

As evening came, her mood shifted.

She started speaking negatively again — saying she might end her life later in the year. When I asked why, she said she didn't want to disturb her parents' new year and spoke about delaying things instead.

Those words alarmed me.

She also asked something that felt unreal — that if she were gone, I should come with a rose, or at least send one through Naveen bhaiya. During that call, she revealed something else.

She said Utsav was still present in the background of her life — not openly, but enough to disturb her peace. She spoke about wanting to confront him, to end whatever influence he still had, as if settling that score was necessary before she could find any calm.

She also said something that surprised me.

That she wanted to apologize to my father.
For everything she had done to me.
For the pain she had caused.

Hearing that didn't bring relief.

It only confirmed how tangled everything still was — how much damage remained unresolved, and how heavy it felt to be pulled into battles that were never meant to be mine.

She told me something else that day.

That some people around her claimed they could read palm lines. She had shown her hand to one of her colleagues once. According to that person, he questioned her — why she wanted to die, how she was still alive despite everything she carried.

I listened quietly.

Then I shared my own experience.

I told her about the time my palm had been read. I was told that I would have two significant partners in my life — that I would marry one of them, and the other would remain only a part of my journey. Another reader had said that I and my future wife would be highly compatible, that the marriage would be peaceful and happy.

I didn’t say it as prophecy.

Just as something I had heard once —

a thought that stayed with me,

especially in moments when the present felt uncertain.

She told me that she no longer felt love for anyone at home.

Not even for her younger brother, Prashant — the one she had once been closest to.

Hearing that unsettled me deeply.

Then she said that before ending her life, she wanted to at least try once for cabin crew.

I answered her directly — without softness.

I told her that if she wanted to make that attempt, I would step away silently.

She didn’t understand what I meant.

So I explained.

That before applying for cabin crew, she should leave me completely and then go after it. I wasn’t stopping her — I was asking her to choose. One path, not both.

She then told me something else.

That after marriage, she would not continue working, she will leave her work [She was in hope of marrying me at this point]. And that before marrying me, she just wanted to complete this one dream — to experience that phase of her life once.

I didn’t hesitate.

I told her no.

I told her clearly that if she wanted to do that, she would have to leave me first. Completely.

There couldn’t be a middle ground anymore. No overlapping hopes. No half-promises. No keeping me emotionally tied while choosing a separate path.

That wasn’t anger.

It was a boundary.

Because by then, I had learned that love without clarity only creates wounds — and I wasn’t willing to bleed quietly anymore.

It was hard to say. Hard to crush or even question someone’s dream. But I said it anyway because I didn’t wanted any type of insecurity.

She replied that because of the marks on her hands, she couldn't even attempt it. The way she said it felt like it was meant to calm me down, to close the topic.

I told her something else then.

That if she wanted to live, she needed an aim. Something to move toward. Something to finish — the way she once spoke about wanting to take a trip to Japan.

At that, she reacted with surprise.

She said she had completely forgotten about that dream.

Then she dismissed it herself — calling it "just a dream," saying it cost too much money, that she couldn't afford it, that it wasn't realistic.

Listening to her, I felt the weight of her hopelessness.

Not sadness alone —
but the exhaustion of someone who had stopped believing that effort could change anything.

And that realization scared me more than anything else she had said.

She told me she missed the time when I used to pamper her with my words — especially during her periods — the way I used to take care of her, notice her pain, and stay gentle with her.

Then she asked whether I would tell my future children about her.

I said yes.

She followed up by asking if I would tell my wife.

I said yes to that too.

Then she asked me something.

What did I like the most about our relationship?

She said she would tell me her answer after mine.

I thought for a moment and then told her honestly.

That I didn't have one specific moment.
That it wasn't about any single memory.

It was about the feeling.

The feeling that I had someone who cared for me. Someone who waited for me to come online just to talk. Someone with whom I could share things I never spoke about at home. Someone who asked whether I had eaten on time. Someone whose presence made the day feel lighter.

It wasn't about moments.

It was about *her presence*.

When I finished, I asked her to tell me what she liked the most.

She refused.

After hearing my answer, she didn't want to speak about hers anymore.

I let it go.

Then she started talking about herself.

She said she looked ugly.
That she was losing hair — maybe because of stress, maybe because of Delhi's water.
That her hands were rough.
That she wasn't very fair.
That she was underweight.

She kept listing everything she disliked about herself.

I stopped her.

I told her that I still loved her — no matter what she called herself.

That in my eyes, she was beautiful. Attractive. That even if her hands were rough, her touch would always feel soft to me. That her eyes, her hairs, her forehead, her smile, her voice — those things hadn't changed for me.

She still didn't understand.

In our society, once people find out a woman isn't a virgin, they often abandon her. In her case, she had been with Utsav — and yet, I didn't know why, but my feelings for her hadn't disappeared.

Even after knowing everything, I still felt for her.

I think that was the truest form of my love —
that it survived even the truths that were supposed to destroy it.

Then she asked me something else.

Why hadn't I stopped her when she broke up?

I reminded her of that day.

That I wasn't just requesting her — I was begging.
Asking her not to leave.
Asking her to talk.
Asking her to stay.

But she didn't listen.

She told me then that Rhea had manipulated her. That Rhea was going through her own breakup at the time and, out of jealousy, pushed Shasi to end things with me. Shasi said she had always been proud of our relationship and believed we would never break up.

She became emotional while saying this.

Then she told me she had lost the ring I gave her — the silver tortoise ring. With all the moving between cities and luggage, it was gone.

She sounded genuinely sad.

I told her it was okay.

That it was just a ring.

But I was still here.

After that, she drifted back into talking about dying again.

I stopped her.

I told her to speak at home about what she was feeling, or to seek help from a counselor — that professional support could actually help her more than endless suffering in silence. I even suggested that she leave her job for a while, return home, focus on treatment, and move forward with the marriage her family had decided.

Then I said something difficult.

That the boy her family had chosen might be better for her than me.

She interrupted immediately.

“Shut up,” she said.
“No boy is better than you. I will never find anyone better than you.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

Inside, I told myself something quietly.

That I had given my best to Shasi.
And that someone else could also give their best to her.

More than anything, I just wanted her to be happy after marriage — even if that happiness had nothing to do with me.

And thinking that way felt like the last honest thing I could offer.

She told me something else then.

That she had come across many boys who were better in different ways. That she had felt attraction toward them and had even wanted to talk to some of them. But even when we weren’t in touch, she felt as

if doing so would mean cheating on me — and because of that feeling, she never took any step in that direction.

That's what she said.

I didn't know whether it was true or not.
I didn't question it further.

Instead, I asked her something simple.

Whether she realized that, during our relationship, she had been an attention seeker.

She admitted it immediately.

Yes, she was.

Then I asked one last question.

For all the people from whom you once sought attention —
where are they now?
Are they still in touch with you?
Do they care about you?

She didn't answer.

But I already had.

And that silence told me more than any explanation ever could.

I told her that my playlist had changed.

That I listened to new songs now. New voices. New moods.

She said hers hadn't changed at all.

I told her that I still sometimes went back to the songs from our time — but mostly, I stayed with new ones. She smiled and asked about one particular Punjabi song we used to listen to together, **Jinne Saah**.

I smiled too and said I remembered it.

Then she asked about the actress in the song.

I told her the name — the same actress I used to tease her about, pretending I had a crush on her just to make Shasi jealous. That small memory made the moment lighter, even if only briefly.

Night came.

I told her something strange — that if she ever died, I would write a book about her.

Almost immediately, I realized the irony. She wouldn't be able to read it.

That's when I told her I had already started writing.

She asked why now.

I told her because my memories were still fresh. Because the more I delayed, the more they would fade. And before our story blurred into fragments, I wanted to capture it honestly.

I asked her what fictional name I should use for her in the book.

She said,
"Shasi."

So that's the name I chose.

My name, I decided, would remain real.
Krish.

The next day was 18th January 2026 [Sunday].

We talked again.

Her condition still wasn't good. She spoke about weakness, exhaustion, and a complete lack of will to live. I told her that I had started reading the Bhagavad Gita and that it gave me some peace. I suggested that whenever she felt afraid or nervous, she could chant "Radha Radha," just to steady herself.

She said her nights were filled with nightmares — of dying, of being harmed, of losing control.

Most of that conversation felt like me consoling her again.

In between, I asked her something difficult.

Whether it was true that she had sent private pictures to her cousin.

She denied it.

She said it wasn't her — that it was Utsav who had sent them. That he had imagined things between her and her cousin, overthought everything, and created the mess himself to "teach her a lesson" and damage her image in her family.

I didn't know what to believe anymore.

Throughout all this, I kept asking her one thing.

To tell me a date.
Any date.
When we could meet.

She kept avoiding it.

No clear refusal.
No clear yes.

Just distance disguised as delay.

Later that day, she sent me a reel.

It spoke about something called *The Last Meeting Theory*.

The idea was simple and unsettling at the same time — that when two people love each other deeply, walk together for as long as they are meant to, and learn all the lessons they were supposed to learn from each other, the universe quietly steps in. After that, it ensures they don't meet again. Not even by accident. Not even if they live in the same city or share mutual friends.

According to the reel, the universe knows when further meetings are unnecessary. How much two people needed to meet has already been completed.

Some people, it said, are not meant to stay in our lives.
They are meant to become chapters.
Lessons.

And when a chapter is complete, the universe slowly removes that person — not abruptly, but inevitably.

The reel ended with a line that stayed with me:

"Some meetings aren't meant to last. They are meant to change us."

And for the first time, I wondered if this was the universe's way of telling me that our meetings had already said everything they were supposed to.

After watching the reel, I asked her quietly,
"So… does this mean we won't meet anymore?"

She replied,
"We will meet."

Later that day, I sent her Chapter One and asked her to read it and tell me what she felt.

She said it all hit her. Deeply.

On the video call, I asked her once more to tell me *when* we would meet.

She avoided the question again.

Something inside me snapped — not loudly, but sharply.

I asked her directly whether she was just using me as a way to pass time.

Her expression changed instantly.

"Yes," she said coldly.
"You think like this — time pass, right?"

And she ended the call.

I called again.
She rejected it.

I tried two or three times more.
Still no answer.

Finally, she picked up.

I could see her again.

This time, I was angry — but I kept my voice calm. I didn't shout. I didn't accuse. Instead, I sent her voice notes. Video messages. Slowly, carefully, I explained everything.

Why I had wanted to meet her.
And why now, I wouldn't.

I told her the truth.

That very soon, my life would be consumed by work. Skills to learn. Interviews to prepare for. Assignments, projects, exams — everything piling up at once. I wouldn't be able to make time for her anymore.

I wanted to meet her only once — not to restart anything — but to end it properly. Completely.

I told her there was no future for us.

That I was certain my parents would never agree.
My father.
My grandmother.
My mother.
My uncle.

No one.

And that this time, I was choosing my family over her.

I told her to leave her job for now and seek professional help. That what she was going through wasn't weakness — it was something happening in the mind, and living alone only made it worse.

I told her something else too.

That there are billions of people in this world. She *will* find someone better than me — someone who supports her without fear or restriction. And once I was gone, she could freely chase her dream of becoming an air hostess, without my presence becoming another conflict.

Then, after that, she could marry the boy her family chose.

I told her I still felt for her.
But there was no scope left.

So I wouldn't continue this anymore.

I told her I would keep sending her the chapters of the book. If she noticed anything wrong, she could suggest corrections by email. If it was feasible, I would fix it.

Then I said the last things I needed to say.

That I would block her everywhere.
That she shouldn't reach out to me again.
And that once the book was complete, I would block her on email too.

I wished her happiness — honestly.

Her final words were simple.

"Hmm."
"Thank you."

And then I blocked her.

After that, as I continued writing, I still sent her chapters. She sent back suggestions. Some I accepted. Some I didn't.

But the line had been drawn.

And this time, it stayed.

This was the last noted confrontation with Shasi.

Everything that followed — the calls, the pauses, the returns — ended here.

And when I looked back, the arc felt painfully clear.

It had all started with a single photograph taken at a party —
a moment that felt harmless then, insignificant even.

And it ended like this.

Not with anger.
Not with closure.

Just with the quiet understanding that some stories begin by accident
and end by exhaustion.

And once they end, the only thing left to do
is not to reopen the chapter again.

Even after everything ended, I kept two of her voice notes with me.

One where she sang a song for me.
And another where she softly told me to sleep.

I didn’t keep them to reopen the past.
I didn’t listen to them often.

They stayed — not as hope, not as attachment — but as reminders.

That once, in some version of life,
someone had sung for me,
and someone had cared enough to wish me rest.

And sometimes, that’s all a memory is meant to be —
not a reason to return,
just proof that something once existed.

Chapter 21: Shasi - A Theory I Choose to Believe

Description: *This chapter is not a continuation of events, but a personal theory — a version of the future I choose to believe in so that I can stay positive and move forward. It exists not to rewrite the past, but to release it. A quiet exercise in hope, acceptance, and letting go.*

There are some stories you don't verify.
You don't cross-check them with reality or wait for proof to arrive.
You choose them.
Quietly.
Because carrying them hurts less than carrying questions forever.

This is one of those stories.

I choose to believe that, at some point, she understood what was happening inside her. That the fear, the sadness, the exhaustion weren't her nature, but a condition asking to be heard. I imagine her finally speaking to someone at home. Maybe it was her mother. I want to believe it was her mother. I want to believe she listened. Not with judgment. Not with control. But with the kind of seriousness pain deserves.

I imagine her being taken to a doctor.
Not dramatically.
Just… responsibly.

I imagine the words *you need help* being spoken without shame.

And then, slowly, I imagine her standing back up.

I like to think her mother pushed her forward instead of pulling her back. That she was reminded she wasn't weak, just overwhelmed. That she was told she could still want things. Still try. Still dream without punishment.

In this version of the world [maybe in this real-world itself], she tries again.
She attempts the air hostess path.
She trains.
She travels.
She feels light for once.

I imagine her enjoying it. Not every day, not perfectly, but enough to know she was capable of joy without fear chasing it immediately. Enough to feel proud when she looked at herself in the mirror. Enough to feel like life wasn't constantly waiting to take something away.

And then time does what time always does.

Two or three years pass.

Her father arranges her marriage.
Not as an escape.
Not as a rescue.
But as a step.

I imagine her entering a new home where she is not constantly on trial. A husband who doesn't compete with her happiness, but protects it. A family where her smiles aren't followed by sudden sadness, where calm doesn't feel temporary.

I imagine her learning what it feels like to be okay for longer than a moment.

She once told me that whenever she became happy, something would happen to break it. In this version of her life, I hope that pattern finally ends. I hope happiness stays long enough to feel normal.

I don't send her these wishes.
I don't say them out loud.
They exist quietly.

Blessings don't always need words.

And as for me — my path is simpler now.

I have a college to complete.
A job to earn.
A family to support.

I will miss her presence. That's honest. Some absences don't disappear just because you accept them. But she is no longer my priority, and that isn't cruelty. It's clarity.

I learned something important along the way:
If you are ever confused between a yes and a no, it is always a no.
Because yes is clear.
Yes does not hesitate.

So if a notification ever appears.
If a missed call arrives.
If a new number tries to reopen a door —

I will close it.

Not out of anger.
Not out of pride.
But because sometimes distance is the only medicine that actually works.

I believe this silence will help her move on from me, even if it feels harsh. And I accept being misunderstood for choosing peace.

There is no hatred here.
No bitterness.
No need for blame.

Only a quiet hope that she stays happy.
That the people around her stay happy.

And that both of us, separately, finally learn what it means to live without breaking ourselves to keep something alive.

Some stories don’t end with reunion.
They end with release.

==========
==========